MAUMBURY RINGS

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BY

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My dear Father,

When this novel was written it was proposed that it should be dedicated to you, and I well remember your pleasure at the suggestion. But the exigencies of war time preventing its publication, a work of lesser importance, so graced, had to be substituted. It is, I believe, against all literary precedence for an author to inscribe more than one book to the same individual, so will you accept this means of association with a work in which you have always taken that sympathetic pleasure so dear to an author's heart?

G. V. McFADDEN.

December, 1920.

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PART I

THE SHUTTLECOCK

I

"BATHIA, BATHIA!"

"MISS BATHIA LOVERIDGE!"

In his own circle the speaker was described as a man of fashion, a man of his word, and a man with an eye in his head. Which latter meant most emphatically—an eye for a pretty woman, a good horse, and his own advantage. It followed, therefore, that the lady so unceremoniously dragged by name into the brilliant glare of the supper-table was taken on trust by the male members of the Blackmore Hunt, and the toast immediately honoured. The women—there were not many present—complied half-heartedly, which was a compliment to the good looks and social status of him who had called the name. There was, in truth, one woman who never raised her glass at all, but sat with her eyes fixed on the speaker's face, and her lips a little parted, waiting for his next words.

But the task of breaking the momentary silence did not fall to him. From half-way down the table a voice arose, and the observation it uttered was sufficiently unusual in the circumstances to attract attention.

"Good God!" it said.

A little buzz of interrogation made itself heard and gathered in volume. Interest was re-born in half-fuddled brains, and closing eyes suddenly became intelligent as their owners sat up and planted their slipping heels more squarely under the table. The younger guests of either sex were already exchanging glances, though none could have told precisely the reason why. By the side of the irresponsive woman an elderly man lifted his head from the tablecloth and made shift to address her.

"Wha's it all about, my queen?" he demanded thickly. "Wha's Gervis a-saying?"

"Silence, fool!" she breathed in answer, and tore her handkerchief into strips beneath the overhanging damask.

And although to a certain extent point had been given to the toast by the astonished interpolation of the guest, it was the host who gathered to himself all the credit of having produced a sensation.

The question begun at the other end of the table had now swept up to him, and broke impatiently into either ear at once.

"Who is she?"

"Who the devil is she?"

"Gervis, who is she?"

"Peverell, by the Lord, I'll quarrel with ye, if you don't tell us who the lady is!"

The young man answered leisurely, ticking off the various points of his description with a delicate tap of his forefinger upon the table. As he did so, an acute observer might have detected something cold, calculating, even a little mercenary, beneath the airy badinage of his speech. For his friends were right; here was a man of fashion, and although the Regency had gone out five years ago, its traditions and its morals still held.

"Miss Bathia Loveridge," Gervis Peverell announced, "is a lady of incomparable parts; the most daring horsewoman in the world. She is a female centaur. She has a seat as firm as a rock, yet she rides light as a breaking wave. To see her in action is to understand the poetry of motion. Her progress is magnificent; her courage unmatched; her endurance superb. To watch her mastery over the bit of horseflesh beneath her is to own one's self the veriest oaf that ever flung a leg across the saddle. Let her but put her talents before an admiring world, and every professional rider will turn green with envy and covet only the glory of being trampled to death beneath her horse's hoofs!"

A little applause broke out, mingled with tipsy guffaws and raw oaths—for this was in the heart of rural Dorset, and the guests were mostly the unpolished gentry of the second class, squires who were agriculturists at heart, and a yeoman farmer or two. Gervis Peverell raised his hand.

"One moment, gentlemen," said he—and now both voice and manner took on a warmer tone—"one moment, pray. You have honoured this paragon at your wine, at my bidding alone. I bow to the compliment, but I myself propose to go a little farther than that. I am prepared to wager my confidence in the lady to the tune of as large a sum as any gentleman may like to name."

At this point it became apparent to the man who had previously expressed his astonishment that the whole incident had been carefully prepared. Glancing along either side of the well-filled table, he noted anew that although in the main the guests were of local celebrity or nonentity, here and there appeared a face pale beside its rubescent neighbours, and wearing an expression of well-ordered ennui. These were the countenances of the town-bred friends of Gervis Peverell, at present, like himself, rusticating in Dorset until certain liabilities could be met, or recent scandals forgotten. It was obvious that it was at these that Peverell's last daring statement was aimed. So much was understood by the acute observer, who wore the dress of a parson, and was known as the biggest simoniac and pluralist in the county.

The languid faces brightened perceptibly; drooping figures developed backbones with incredible celerity, and while the rustic element still gaped and stared, a brisk young voice took up the challenge.

"Against an open field, Peverell?" it asked.

"Against any professional or amateur, male or female, you like to name."

"Against Jack the Roarer?"

Peverell nodded.

"Done, then! Three thousand; guineas. Do you take it?"

"Certainly, Sir George. At three to one. And any other gentleman on the same terms."

The supper was being held at the largest inn in the town, but the Hunt, under the patronage of the heir of the Earl of Maumbury, was popular, and already the crowded room was stifling and airless. But with the acceptance of the bet the atmosphere appeared to become still more heated, the fumes heavier, and the din more overpowering.

The instigator of all this excitement, the coolest man, with the exception of the parson, in the assembly, was plied on all sides with questions. Sporting instincts were aroused in the more phlegmatic souls, while the young bloods, his personal guests and friends—some half-dozen of the fastest men in town—all had their pencils and notebooks out, and were clamouring with plebeian pertinacity for a hearing. In five or eight minutes after Miss Bathia Loveridge had been first toasted, Gervis Peverell stood to win or lose close on fifty-four thousand guineas by her prowess in the saddle. Innumerable smaller bets sprang out of the primary one. A bumper was called for, glasses filled and drained by throats already husky with the quantity of liquor previously swallowed. Some of the young bloods, and not a few of the local stock, had thrown in their lot with Peverell, and while the room grew hotter and the mild November air, floating in damply through the wide windows, scarcely flickered the candle-flames, the names of the rival competitors were tossed to and fro in a very miz-maze of oracular championship.

"Bathia! Bathia!"

"Jack the Roarer! Roaring Jack!"

"Tom Morgan!"

"The Welsh Rabbit!"

And again—led by an excited young fellow at the bottom of the table—

"Bathia! Bathia!"

Throughout the whole extraordinary scene two persons only maintained a semblance of self-control. The parson leant back in his chair, untouched alike by the wine which he had taken or the prevailing excitement and disorder. He joined his finger-tips high up over his well-filled waistcoat, and a little smile, sub-acid in its humour, lifted the corners of his large complacent mouth.

At his side sat the woman who had ignored the toast. As "Diana of the Woodlands" she had already received her own compliment earlier in the evening. Now, amid the general disorder, she sat like a statue, pale beneath her finely drawn black brows, with glittering eyes and firmly set lips. Of Dorset birth and breeding, she represented an even older type than was proclaimed by the soft Saxon lineaments and colouring of her neighbours. It had taken the genius of a master-mind, a fleet of armed galleys, the groans of a slaughtered host, the wailing of innumerable widows, to produce this proud-featured piece of womanhood on English soil.

And in bequeathing to her a finely chiselled head and a figure of superb dignity and charm her alien ancestors had bestowed upon her also the gifts of repression, of silence, and of ambition. Now as she glanced contemptuously at her companion on the other side, whose grey head was again pillowed among the plates and dishes, or turned her brilliant eyes upon young Gervis Peverell, there was nothing but the torn handkerchief in her lap to indicate that the scene had any interest for her at all.

Suddenly the parson turned, and caught at someone passing behind him. It was the young fellow who had sat at the bottom of the table, and led the last cheering for the lady's name. He took a half-step backwards, swung out a friendly hand and paused by the parson's chair.

"Ah, Willavize," said he in a tone nicely balanced between condescension and intimacy; "sorry I hadn't time to speak before. I saw you from my place, but I didn't expect to find you here. Didn't know you were in the town, in fact."

"Only for a day or so, Mr. Felix. I'm bringing young Chaldecott to see his lordship."

"Chaldecott? Don't know the name. Who is he?"

"H'm. No. You wouldn't know him, of course. He's a young fellow your uncle has been good enough to take an interest in."

Felix Peverell, whose eyes were straying past the parson to his fair companion, laughed a little.

"Lucky devil! I wish his lordship could be induced to take an interest in me!"

"H'm," said the parson. He sipped his wine thoughtfully. Then— "I wouldn't envy him if I were you, Mr. Felix," he added.

"Well, if this female paragon is all that Gervis swears she is, I'll envy no man on earth—save one!"

Across the parson's burly form the eyes of the speaker again sought those of Diana Woodland, and his hot face glowed a little deeper still. Then the glances of the pair of them fell simultaneously upon the grey head at the lady's elbow.

The parson nodded.

"I noticed," said he, "that you took your brother's advice—as usual, Mr. Felix."

"Well, you know Gervis—a woman, a horse, or a bargain, he's never out. And when all three are represented by the same lovely goddess any man's a fool who doesn't put his money on her at once."

"I see," nodded the parson.

For the first time Diana Woodland struck into the talk. With a slow, almost languorous raising of her dark head, she put a question.

"Is she lovely, and a goddess, by the way?" she asked.

"Lord!" laughed Felix Peverell. "Ask Gervis, Mrs. Woodland. I've never seen the lady. She can be as ugly as she likes, for all I care, if only she gets to the post first."

"Your brother has seen her, then?"

"You may take that for granted," Felix Peverell replied almost shortly, his good-humoured face darkening a little. "What does it matter?"

" For the sake of his bet—a good deal, I should say. As far as my interest goes—not at all ! "

She shrugged her handsome shoulders, and rose to her feet, regal and contemptuous. She laid one hand for a moment on the arm of the sleeping man.

" Nicholas," said she.

As he struggled up at her bidding, bleary-eyed and staggering, her eyes filled with aversion, and Felix Peverell stood biting his lips, watching the pair.

" Comin', my beauty, comin', Di," mumbled the besotted spouse, regaining the perpendicular with an effort. His blood-shot eyes recognized the young man near by, and a shaking hand shot out. " Wha', Felix? Goo' lad. Pleased to see ye. Your servant, sir."

" For God's sake," hissed his wife, " come away !"

Her gaze sought the younger Peverell. He moved quickly to Nicholas Woodland's side, and between the two the squire was convoyed out of the room and across the landing to his lodgings for the night. They got him, mumbling and shaking, into an armchair, and the young man took formal leave.

As the door closed behind him Diana Woodland glanced round at her husband, and finding that he had fallen asleep again she slid across the floor, and was at Felix Peverell's side before he had recrossed the landing to the supper-room.

The place was dimly lit, cool and shadowy; silent, too, save for the unabated clamour beyond the closed door. Neither maid nor man was there to break the momentary solitude of these two. He caught her in his arms, and the cheek of either burnt its companion anew.

But the woman was the first to draw away, and she did so a little petulantly.

" Felix," she whispered, " what does it mean? Who is this—hussy? "

The young man did not immediately reply. His own arms had fallen limply to his sides, and in the soft light she could see that he was frowning.

" What can it matter who she is? " he demanded in his turn. " Why should you care? "

" She seems to matter to Gervis."

" Why should that trouble you, Diana? "

She made no reply. From the room behind them came the sound of a shuffling tread.

" What is this woman to him, Felix? " cried Diana with hurried breathing. " You are hiding the truth from me ! "

"Before God, I'm not!" answered he. "I know no more of her than you do."

Her foot tapped the carpet.

"That's worse still!" she said. "Gervis is hiding something, then."

Felix Peverell stood alternating between gloom and anger.

"Let him!" he cried with heat. "What does it matter to us?"

"Oh—us!"

"To you, then. What's Gervis—or Gervis's friends to you?"

"This isn't a case of friendship. It can't be. A woman —is she young?—tell me that!"

"I believe so. I don't know. What——?"

Again her foot struck the floor, with anger now.

"A young woman doesn't consent to make an exhibition of herself in a steeplechase out of mere friendship for a man! Gervis knows that. He wouldn't ask it. If she's agreed to do this thing for him, 'tis because he promised in return—what?"

"How should I know? Gervis doesn't tell me anything."

Diana laughed scornfully.

"Just so. He'd marry, and never ask you to the wedding. What a useless fool you are, Felix!"

He reddened, defensively.

"You think he's promised to marry her?—you think they're lovers?"

"Yes," she said vehemently, "I do."

Yet the thought was rather a fear than a belief. Felix Peverell appeared to turn over the suggestion in his mind.

"The only Loveridges I know of," he said at length, "are the infidel's family at Kinson. Gervis isn't likely to wed there because of my uncle."

"There's something in that," admitted the woman at his side, after a pause. She looked fixedly at him. "Yes; yet this paragon of the saddle may come of other stock after all."

"I have told you I can't help you, Diana," returned young Peverell sullenly. "And, upon my soul, I wouldn't if I could!"

"Why not? You are hard to-night."

"You are hard, Diana. You are hurting me, and doing it deliberately. I wish Gervis were——"

"Yes?" she asked with lowered eyes.

"Married!" said Felix with a short laugh. "You make me doubt at times whether you love me at all—whether you have ever loved me——"

"Hush!"

Her hand flew out towards his lips, and at the same moment the door behind them was jerked open, and Nicholas Woodland's towzled head appeared.

"Dian'—wha' the devil you mean by leaving me to pull off shoes mysel'?"

"I'm coming," she said.

"I must see you again," whispered Felix Peverell. "When do you leave?"

"To-morrow, I think. Meet me at noon."

"Where?"

"Maumbury Rings. Good-bye!"

She glided off to the room where her ill-mated spouse awaited her, and the young man made his way back to his brother's guests.

The party, he found, was on the point of breaking up. In the doorway he ran into Parson Willavize on his way out, complacent, urbane, and carrying his three bottles as a gentleman should.

"Shall I have the pleasure of seeing you over in my parish, Mr. Felix?" asked he as they paused on the threshold.

"Your parish? My dear sir, which?"

"Parley, to be sure—the damnedest dull one of the lot."

"What makes you think it?"

"The new Gift Horse is there. My lord mentioned that he might send you over to fetch it."

"The devil he did! I've heard nothing. He ordered me to come down into Dorset, and I came, not knowing why. Well, I'm at his lordship's service. What's the horse like this time?"

"Ask your brother, sir."

"Oho!" said Felix. "Gervis has been over and seen the horse, then?"

"A little more than the horse, apparently," said the parson with a dry smile.

Felix Peverell had just arrived at the same conclusion.

"Then she is of the Kinson stock!" he cried.

"Of course. Didn't you know? Next parish to mine."

"The infidel's daughter?"

"The reformer's daughter," observed the parson gravely.

"'Tis all one. Infidels or reformers, my lord hates both alike," said Felix with conviction.

"All the better for the country," declared the parson stoutly. "The Radicals would send it to hell. Good-night, Mr. Felix. Humour my lord. He's breaking-up fast, I'm afraid."

He left the inn, crossed the road leisurely, his head and throat bare to the mild November breezes, and made his way to a house of entertainment a few yards farther down the street. The town would have been quiet, for it was close on midnight, but for the members of the Blackmore Hunt who were pouring forth noisily from the inn he had just left. The cry of "*Bathia, Bathia!*" was still in the ascendant. The parson heard it, shrugged his broad shoulders, and entered the quieter inn.

A young man sat reading by a small fire, and glanced up as he came into the room.

II

IN LEADING-STRINGS

"STILL up, Demas?"

The young man flung aside his book with a querulous movement.

"Yes. You're late. I thought you were never coming."

Parson Willavize dropped into a chair by the fire and looked at the other thoughtfully.

"Why didn't you go to bed?" he asked with a seriousness beyond the casual question.

"With that Bedlam clamour your party have been making in my ears? Hark! They've not ended it even now."

A group of the revellers went roaring down the street. When they had passed the silence closed again.

"Yes; it was rather a lively randy," admitted the parson with retrospective enjoyment. Suddenly he leant forward and laid three plump fingers on the young man's knee. "I wish you'd been there, Demas," he said.

"I don't," said Demas Chaldecott, looking into the fire.

"Get me a drop of the real home-brewed and a morsel of blue vinny," said the other lazily. "Nothing like plain fare after the rich man's table, my boy."

His companion served him in silence, and returned to his seat.

Parson Willavize chuckled inwardly, knowing well enough what was wrong. Then he pulled himself up.

"You're not very civil to-night, Demas," said he. "If you can't be more amiable I shall pack you off to bed."

"I beg your pardon, sir. Perhaps I am in a bad temper this evening—— "

"H'm—there's nothing new in that."

Demas Chaldecott shrugged his shoulders and pleaded guilty by saying nothing. A frown of irritation rose to the elder man's smooth forehead, and he was about to reply with some sharpness, but checking himself he filled a glass from the jug on the table, and sipping the ale slowly turned his eyes again in the direction of his companion. No answering glance compelling him to speak, he continued so to gaze for a minute or more—during which time an observer of himself would have noted a retrospective look lending vigour to an habitually complacent face.

Whatever contemplation held his inner vision, the natural eyes of him beheld a sight suggestive enough to one of his worldly outlook and experience. A young man of some four-and-twenty years sat elbow to elbow at his side, supple and well-made, with a precision of outline that rendered every turn of his body a delight to the parson's artistic sense. So much—seen at a distance.

A closer view usually left strangers with one impression only. Having looked into Demas Chaldecott's face for the first time, they brought away a remembrance of no more than his eyes. Deep-set, luminous, passionate as they were, they might have been set in an otherwise featureless countenance; so compelling was their most casual glance that the width of the forehead, the regularity of nose and lips, the clear brown of the skin were but so much extravagance on the part of an over-generous craftsman. Those eyes of themselves would have caused their owner to leave the print of his personality wherever he moved. And such was their power that even the unruly school urchins who would have unflinchingly played truant or have champed apples beneath the rule of a sourer visage, gave unwilling obedience to this master who left their sturdy carcases unsmitten and their ears unharassed by vituperation.

At the end of his unheeded scrutiny, the parson's face softened into an expression of genuine affection, for he had found something loveable in the lad, and something pitiable, too. He touched his shoulder.

"What is it you want, my boy?" he asked.

"I want to be out in the world!" was the quick reply, and for a moment the parson felt himself looking through the passionate eyes into the still more passionate soul.

"The world isn't the best place for a lad like you to be vamping about in," he said without harshness. "You'd only make a mess of things; all your people did."

"My people?" said Demas quickly. His dark head came up at the word, but the parson went on with no heed to the interruption.

"You've got a snug enough place in that little parish of mine. I've given you the parsonage to live in. You might have had to keep school in Puddy's cottage, you know. Why aren't you contented? What more does the lad want?"

"If the parish is such a desirable locality, sir, why don't you spend more time in it yourself?"

The parson caught his eye; his own twinkled, and his broad chest began to rumble.

"Ha, ha!" he laughed; "by the rod of Moses, you have me there!"

"'Tis precisely where we don't have you, sir," answered his young companion with a sense of humour unpredicted by those stormy eyes of his. They softened at the touch of it, and became very pleasant to behold.

"Well, well," laughed the parson, seeking to encourage this better mood, "lay the blame on to those infernal roads of yours! But devil take me if I won't come back with you and give the church an airing, after all! When was I there last?—pastorally, I mean. Last July? Dear, dear, is it so long? When Puddy broke the rotten old bell-rope, and came crashing down, and I thought 'twas certainly the Day of Doom at last. What a figure o' fun he did cut, to be sure! I don't suppose the sacred walls ever heard such fine swears since the Lady of Lydlinch endowed 'em."

"Are you quite sure of that, sir?" asked Demas with a slow smile of raillery.

"Now, now, my boy," cried Willavize with mock seriousness, "'tis not your place to criticize the clergy. A plain good *damn* in the laity may be sin, but the office dignifies the cleric always, and all's for edification that proceeds out of his mouth. Has the rope been mended, by the way?"

"Not to my knowledge," said Demas indifferently.

"Well, get it seen to, lad, before next Sabbath, and tell the folks I'm coming. We'll have everything in order this time, and give none occasion to the ungodly to blaspheme."

"Meaning Squire Loveridge, I suppose?"

"Meaning that particularly rank Socinian and futile social reformer, Squire Loveridge. Do you see much of the family, Demas?"

"What? The village schoolmaster see much of the Squire's family?"

"Now, now, now, young man! Then you don't know Miss Bathia?"

Demas shook his head moodily.

"The young trollop has promised to ride for Mr. Peverell, it seems," the parson told him. "Dashing little hussy! Broken out of her leading-strings at last. There's a fortune of Lord knows how many thousands hanging on to it. That ought to provide a little excitement for you, my boy."

"Oh, she can ride," said Demas. "I've seen her flying about the countryside in a scarlet habit like a flame. But I'm not likely to see much of it. What, or whom, do I ever see?"

The parson rubbed his smooth chin, and shook his head at the young fellow with a kind of irritated sympathy, for the pair of them were hovering on the edge of well-worn ground.

"Well," he remarked at length, "you're to see Lord Maumbury on the morrow. And he does you the honour to be extremely anxious to see you."

"So you've told me, sir. I suppose that's very good of him, provided he means well."

The words were civil enough, but the tone was one of half-smothered revolt. Parson Willavize took up the challenge at once.

"What else should he mean, you young sinner?" he demanded sharply.

"The patrician desire to applaud his own patronage."

"He doesn't mean that. Don't you think it. He's been a good friend to you——"

"I don't deny it, sir."

"Good! Try and remember it when you meet him, and don't throw any of your damned Radicalism in his face."

"That's the root of the trouble, sir!" exclaimed the young schoolmaster impetuously. "If I am a Radical, as you aver——"

"You're one in embryo, if not in actuality," threw in the other with a grimace.

"Granted! Then what, in heaven's name, am I doing as a dependent on the bounty of the richest peer in the realm? Here have I, ever since I could understand anything, had Lord Maumbury's name perpetually dinned into my ears. Education, books, livehood—all have been his gift, and yet the result has fallen far short of what I might have achieved without his help. The miserable sense of dependence, with its necessary show of gratitude and obedience, has forbidden any initiative effort on my part. I tell you, sir, that man, well-meaning and generous though he has been, has stultified ambition and endeavour alike. And even now, when my own puny knowledge of things has shown me all this—I don't for the life of me see how I can break away from the track he has set me in, without making myself an example of the basest ingratitude and selfishness."

The parson leant back from the table with a clouded brow. There was truth in the young man's perfervid utterances, but while recognizing the facts his own more perfect experience still saw no way of mending the matter.

"Tut, tut, nonsense," said he, therefore. "You're growing morbid. Come with me and see his lordship. He'll brace you up, there isn't a doubt. Only I hope you'll behave, and say nothing to hurt his feelings. He's done a deal for you, and, however your over-refined intellect may regard it, you ought to be grateful. But that's the way of the age; every youngster must stand on his own feet, and snap at the hand that's held out to help him."

"No, no," cried Demas; "if I were as bad as all that, I should go my own way without a thought to his lordship at all."

His friend regarded him quizzically, lolling back in his chair and tapping his broad heels on the floor.

"H'm, h'm," commented he. "I never said you were bad at all. You'll do well enough, I haven't a doubt, when those two excellent schoolmasters Time and Experience have had the birching of ye—and when that day comes, as likely as not they'll put the rod into a woman's hand! You're undisciplined as yet, an unbroken colt jibbing at the harness, a puppy that doesn't know the danger that lurks round the corner of the kennel. . . . But you'll do; you'll do, some day . . ."

The masterful voice trailed off into silence, and the critical look faded from the eyes. Presently a sigh disturbed the serenity of the ample breast, and Parson Willavize appeared to awake from some mental slumber.

And yet, paradoxically enough, it was precisely at that moment that his conscience turned over and went to sleep again.

III

MY LORD OF MAUMBURY

To look upon Everard, ninth Earl of Maumbury, in the third decade of the nineteenth century, was to see a man out of touch with his own age and fortune. He had grown away from his contemporaries as much in a moral sense as he had removed himself personally from among them. As a natural consequence, they had almost forgotten him, so that, to the younger generation of his own rank, he was a name—rather a blighting and distasteful name—and no more.

Singularly little, it would appear, was known of his youth. Called upon by the premature death of his father to take up the title, he had suddenly shown himself moving about his newly-acquired possessions with an air somewhat too sober to promise a continuance of the rollicking traditions of his house. Such Puritanical reforms as were speedily effected by this latest scion of the ancient and noble family of Peverell had little about them to recommend them to his hard-living unthinking compeers, and gradually the serious young man drew more and more into himself, mixed little with his fellows, and entertained not at all.

A stupid sort of amazement at first characterized his neighbours' attitude towards so remarkable a son of the Peverells—who were renowned for their loose morals, hard riding, and general dare-devilry. But, with the passing of the years, the ninth Earl of Maumbury fell into the place which he had chosen for himself, and was accepted with the phlegmatic lack of interest which a half-educated gentry and squirearchy brought to bear upon all enigmas beyond their intelligence. So things remained until, in the thirty-fourth year of his age, Lord Maumbury had revived gossip concerning himself by apostatising from the acknowledged faith of his ancestors, and adopting that of the Wesleyans.

It may be doubted whether the wildest excesses of those same forebears had ever caused so many heads to be wagged in solemn disapproval as did this act of a presumably conscientious man. Those who would have broken cheerfully every law in the decalogue, but for the law in the statute-book, were seemingly appalled by such retrogression, and while the rising generation made cynical comment, the duller-pated of his compeers would have shunned such a degenerate had he not made this practically impossible by having already shunned them.

There was left, notwithstanding, a remnant to bear witness in Israel to the former traditions of the house, in the shape of the two nephews. Of these, little was known in the county to which they belonged. Once or twice in a year, one or the other of them re-appeared at Wyke Hall, had an audience of the head of the house, and departed—with a difference. The elder, Gervis, was observed at such times to exhibit a scarcely veiled contempt for the manners and customs of his uncle's establishment; while Felix, the younger, invariably got to saddle as speedily as he decently could, with an exaggerated expression of distaste and awe upon his more good-humoured countenance.

Both young men had a full measure of good looks; the personable quality of face and form being part of their heritage. It was affirmed that the more volatile Felix was the favourite, yet, in truth, there was little ground for such assumption either way, since Lord Maumbury was severely self-controlled in sympathy and prejudice alike.

In his fiftieth year he was still a handsome man, though his habitual gravity added to his age, so that his vitality appeared to approach decline while not yet much past its zenith. In figure he was tall and spare, upright without effort, graceful in gesture, controlling his long lean limbs by an almost unconscious volition that imparted to him at all times an air of ease little to be looked for in one who had spent so much of his life in seclusion. His features were severely aquiline, in this foreshadowing those of his elder nephew; his complexion was pale, the repressed lips lacking the colour which is the attribute to perfect health; the eyes, somewhat sunken though they were, alone gave a vivid impression of vitality in one who seemed to have outlived either some great sorrow or some great joy.

This, then, in his outward man, was he who turned from the window to meet Parson Willavize's quizzical gaze, on the morning after the Blackmore Hunt supper.

An imperceptible pause followed—imperceptible to the servant who announced the visitor, but noted by the parson himself; probably because he had expected it. He had the honour to rank as the earl's oldest friend, but Lord Maumbury had never showed a disposition to fall upon his neck for sheer pleasure at seeing him. On this occasion, his greeting was formal, even chilly in its self-control.

"I see that you have come, Willavize," he said, "as I desired. Be seated, pray. When did you arrive?"

"We rode in yesterday, my lord. Deuced hard going, too, the greater part of the way. You don't know what riding is until you've floundered along the infernal tracks they mis-call roads in that confounded easterly parish of mine. Whew! I'm hot—sweltering in your service, my lord, and yet I don't see the thing my soul desires."

Without a word Lord Maumbury lifted a silver bell, and signed to the visitor to give his own order. A few moments afterwards the clerical countenance was hidden by a generous upraising of a tankard of brandy and water. Which emptied, the parson pulled off his neck-cloth, threw back his greatcoat, and lolled easily in the depths of the comfortable chair in which an unerring instinct had deposited him. It was part of the man's quality that what would have become vulgarity in another, in him was merely an expression of good-natured complacency, seasoned with a sub-humorous appreciation of the opinion of his fellows. Upon his present companion his attitude appeared to make no impression at all. An onlooker would have decided that in this quarter, at least, old custom had taken the savour out of the parson's irregularities.

Lord Maumbury sat stiffly in his chair, which was placed near the window, to which his gaze turned invariably during any pause in the conversation, which he opened by remarking—

"You said 'we.' The young man accompanied you, I understand?"

"Oh, I brought him along," assented the parson easily.

"Where is he now?"

"Well, to tell the truth, as I wanted to say a few words into your ear about him, I judged it best he should be out of the way for awhile. So I sent him off to have a look at Maumbury Rings——"

The other's gaze came round quickly from the window-pane.

"Maumbury Rings! What malice made you send him there?"

The parson rubbed his forehead, and twisted up his lips.

"Well, to be sure, my lord, it is a draughty spot, but the lad's young and strong, and not likely to catch either lumbago or a cold in the head, and 'tis an interesting place, and well adapted to rumination. Which is a thing he's grown morbidly fond of, of late—confound him!"

A slight frown appeared above the sunken eyes which were now regarding him attentively enough.

"Why should not a young man be given to meditation? Would to God we saw a little more of it, Willavize. I pray that his reflections be for his soul's good."

"H'm," said the parson, rubbing his chin, "I don't gather from his conversation that he's worrying over his soul as yet. Which, by your leave, I take as a good sign."

"How so, Willavize?"

"Because a man's soul is much the same as his other internal organs. When's it's in a healthy condition, he doesn't know it's there."

"The devil speaks truth at times, I see, Evurtius."

"The devil he does!" cried the parson wittily.

Once again the eyes which seemed the sole humanized feature in the well-controlled face turned to the window. It commanded the long vista of Dorchester High Street—a thoroughfare of true Roman simplicity and directness, so that Lord Maumbury looked straight into the heart of the country which joined the town so abruptly that one passed from the urban to the rural with a single footstep. And in the earl's gaze was that look of vague concentration which comes from the contemplation of objects far remote either in point of time or place.

His visitor made no attempt to hurry him into speech, but flinging one leg across the other caressed his ankle and whistled under his breath. The most weighty thought in his own mind at the moment was that the tankard was empty.

At length Lord Maumbury spoke.

"Since your young friend has happily no spiritual troubles, what is it that ails him? Is he what they call in love?"

"God forbid!" cried the parson unfeignedly. "Now who the devil should he fall in love with in that deserted hole?"

"As I'm not familiar with the place, Willavize, I cannot answer your question. But my experience, poor as it is, favours the belief that women may be found anywhere."

"Egad, my lord, you're right!" said the other. "I've known 'em intrude even into Maumbury Rings."

The earl appeared to smother resentment or annoyance at the other's flippancy.

"Let us go back to the point," he said. "If neither young Chaldecott's heart nor soul are touched, what, I ask again, is the matter with him?"

"A common malady in youth," was the short reply. "Discontent."

Lord Maumbury looked distressed. His long lean fingers clasped and unclasped themselves on his knee.

"What is he dissatisfied with?" he asked.

"As far as I can understand—with everything."

"I am amazed and disappointed to hear it. Wherein have I failed?—can you tell me that, Willavize? Surely I have done a great deal for him?"

"Oh, you've been a father to him, my lord. Upon my soul I don't know where he'd have been without you."

A touch of colour warmed the pale features of the patron. He pursued his argument at once.

"What then? Is gratitude dead in the young man? Have I given him the benefit of my influence and interest in vain?"

"If you ask me," replied the other bluntly, "you've done a damned sight too much for him. Far better have left him alone, I say."

Lord Maumbury's cheek reddened still more. His eyes flashed brightly as he asked:

"And who recommended him to my notice, Evurtius? Who threw his childish helplessness and sad history before my eyes? Who represented, nay, urged his case as one worthy of a rich man's benevolence?"

Parson Willavize uncrossed his legs, and stared blandly up at his questioner.

"Well, of course," said he, "I did."

The other's cheek waned to its normal pallor again, and his voice resumed its even tones at his next speech.

"That being so," said he, "what blame is mine?"

The parson threw up his shoulders and took snuff delicately.

"We'll not argue, my lord. After all, we both acted from the best intentions without pausing to think of the mischief we might do. That mischief has been done, there's not a doubt."

"I am pained to hear it, Willavize. Pray explain. If lifting this young man out of his station has led him into sin——"

"I never said so! He's an honest clean-living lad," cried the parson, fixing his companion with a certain challenging look in his eye. "But he's proud, ambitious, and—passionate. Left alone in his grandfather's ale-house, half-educated, and with no prospect of ever becoming more than a prosperous tradesman in some obscure town, he might in time have outlived his barely understood ambitions, and settled down to a useful career. But you—your pardon, my lord!—*we* have given him a taste of better things; we've taught him to recognize his own abilities, to feel his own latent power, to stretch out his hot young hands to things beyond his reach—and then, why, then, my dear Maumbury, we've put a rope round his neck, and jerked him back like a hound on a leash, and said, 'Mustn't touch, naughty little boy, mustn't touch.' To put it plainly, we've made him thoroughly and absolutely discontented."

Lord Maumbury was silent for a long time.

"Would to God, Willavize," he broke out at length, "that I could apply the remedy! If I thought that I had spoilt his life——"

"Yes; if you thought that you had spoilt his life—what would you do?"

"Would he be more satisfied, think you, if I found him a place at Wyke Hall?"

"Better not, my lord," returned the other drily. "I don't advise it."

Lord Maumbury fell into a gloomy reverie. Presently he spoke.

"There is one thing," said he, "which distresses me beyond measure. You referred to the young man as being of a passionate temper."

"I did. It's an hereditary blemish; derived, as I tell him, from his mother's family."

"Have you endeavoured to correct this fault in him?"

"Lord love you," cried the other with his easy laugh. "if I were to try to correct the faults of all my parishioners, I'd have the devil's own task!"

"Your pleasantries are out of place," was the cold rebuke. "Pray keep to the point."

"Be hanged if I know what is the point of this interview," replied the parson crossly. "You've got something at the back of your mind, Maumbury. What the devil is it?"

"You are right; quite right. I sent for Demas Chaldecott because I have a proposition to lay before him—one which I have decided upon only after long meditation and prayer."

"What is it?" asked the visitor bluntly.

"It has been borne in upon me in so convincing and persistent a way that I can only recognize divine guidance in the matter, that he must marry Julia Trickett," said the earl.

"Marry—Julia—Trickett!" gasped the parson. Then he lay back in his chair, heels outspread, and swore vehemently.

IV

THE TEMPESTUOUS PETTICOAT

In the meanwhile, the young man whose career was being thus drawn out for him with the unemotional precision of a geometrical design, was pursuing his favourite occupation of ruminating—in Maumbury Rings.

The object of his summons to his patron's house was even less clear to Demas himself than to his friend the parson. The great man—and a rent-roll of a hundred thousand a year spelt a very great man indeed—had not yet assumed any definite personality in the mind of the young schoolmaster, though the name of Lord Maumbury had been familiar from his early years. To his interest and beneficence the boy had owed his well-being, the youth his education, and the young man his start in life. And yet, as the restless recipient of these favours had pointed out to his benefactor's agent, it was precisely the thought of all this that irked and galled him now. Neither equable enough to make the best of his conditions, nor debased enough to spurn the hand that had fed him, he was in danger of becoming wrecked by the limitations which were within him.

It was under the parson's direction that Demas proceeded on foot towards the well-nigh unique outpost of paganism from which the family of Peverell drew its title. Lying a little out of the heart of the town, yet in close enough proximity to allow a sight of the clustering roofs and towers from its eminence, this noticeable structure appeared to his wondering gaze as a verdant horse-shoe cast by some Titanic rider, which had flattened itself at the rounded end in falling.

With a dumb majesty which passed from mere indifference to complete detachment, the Rings—which, geometrically, were not rings at all—remained like a few almost undecipherable hieroglyphics written across the history of a newer civilization. And if an acute observer read on the page the words—Mene, Tekel, the condemnation itself induced a retrospective sympathy with that which even in its overthrow had left a seemingly imperishable memorial of one of its most ephemeral attributes.

For here, in these green slopes, was reminder of neither ancient mart, nor burial-ground, nor fortification, but only a record of the robust amusement of a long-dead people. The place had been an amphitheatre, its structural formation still remaining wonderfully preserved, so that but small imagination was required to fill its triple tiers with a host of excited spectators, or to catch the cry of *habet!* in the wind that commonly cut through its arena. So closely, in truth, had the spot become associated with the notion of spectacular diversions of a tragic kind, that in later days it has been used as a place of public execution.

Demas Chaldecott entered the Rings from the south-west, made a measured perambulation around the oval, and finally clambered to the summit, whence he could regard the distant view of the town. Lying back at full length, he thrust his hands beneath his head, and stared his fill, intellectually oppressed by the antiquity which surrounded him, yet in his own thraldom seeming strangely at one with the dead things which had ceased to be of any account in a bustling modern world. He fell to envying the grim combatants who had struggled in the space below, even though at the last they had raised their blood-shot eyes to see the down-turned thumbs of Death.

Suddenly all prospect became blotted out by a figure which from his recumbent position loomed very large upon him. Springing elastically into a more normal attitude he found himself looking eye to eye at a young man but little older than himself. As on his side the meeting was entirely unexpected, the soft down-like grass having deadened the other's footfall, he left it to the newcomer to explain the encounter.

"What the devil are you doing here?" asked the young man who stood erect, of the one who had dropped back upon his elbow and showed no disposition to rise.

The manner of his asking the question was not as uncivil as the words disassociated from look and tone might appear. It was a fact that Demas Chaldecott, prone as he was to anticipate slights and contempt, found in them nothing to resent, and, in answering, replied rather to the other's carelessly friendly demeanour than to the question itself.

"I did not know that it is private ground," he said.

"I didn't say that it is," rejoined the newcomer. "As a matter of fact, it's not. I only asked what you are doing here."

"Nothing in particular," said Demas, sitting up, and regarding his companion with a show of interest.

Obviously this young sprig of fashion had nothing in common with the rusticity which at present surrounded him. That he was modishly dressed, Demas knew more by instinct than by any experience of such superficial matters. He had, moreover, an ease of bearing, a smoothness of utterance, accentuated by a slight drawling over the vowel sounds, and a few trivial mannerisms which were strange to the youth at his side. But, because that same country-bred youth had the God-given penetration that is independent of environment and even of experience, he was not slow to understand that here was an amiable good-natured young soul, tolerant without being wise, self-indulgent, indolent. On the whole, a pleasant enough companion to fill up his own few remaining empty moments.

That the stranger reciprocated these not unfriendly feelings was shown even while Demas was thus roughly epitomizing his probable character, for he sat himself down on the short sward, and looked into the other's wonderful eyes with a smile in his own.

"Who are you?" he inquired.

"Schoolmaster by trade. My name is Chaldecott."

"Oh! Out for a holiday?"

"Of a sort," said Demas with a shrug.

"Seems a queer way of spending it——" opined the other with a flourish of his light cane, "sitting alone in this mouldering old spot of the ancients."

"I was told it was interesting."

"Indeed! Do you find it so?"

"Yes. It stands for so much."

The modish young man stared.

"What do you mean?"

"All possible human emotions are typified here," said Demas, looking thoughtfully down into the green basin of the theatre. "They must all have been felt—lived—thrown aside—within these boundaries. Life! Men lived here—and died. Think what that means! Why, if emotions were only concrete things, we should be choked, you and I, by the miasma of it all."

"Good Lord! Is that what you were thinking when I came up?"

Demas nodded indifferently.

"What a queer fellow you must be! Who cares a straw about the men who died here? That's where the gibbet stood—just there." He tossed a stone down into the arena. "Why don't you think of something pleasant? Of the women, now. Think of the hundreds of lovely creatures who must have sat on this very spot. Not much miasma—whatever that may be—about them, I'll swear."

"Oh! Women," said Demas coolly. "I didn't think of them."

"Good Lord!" said his companion again. Then with emphasis—" You are a queer fellow, damned if you're not ! "

Demas pulled out his watch. It was a heavy old-fashioned silver thing, and by the side of his elegant new acquaintance, it looked ashamed of itself. It was some consciousness of this that prompted its owner's next words—for he was still young, and the vanity had not yet been whipped out of him.

" I must be going," he said as he thrust the poor old dingy time-keeper away. " I have to be at Lord Maumbury's house in ten minutes from now, and I suppose I ought not to keep him waiting."

An episode to have set Parson Evurtius's comfortable frame shaking with inward laughter. This, from a young fellow who supposed himself to be a Radical.

" Lord Maumbury ? By the Powers, no ! He's the most precise old cock in this benighted county. If you've got any favours to ask, you'd better scuttle, or 'tis long odds you'll go away disappointed. Don't I know it to my cost ! "

" I have no favours to ask," returned Demas a little drily. " He wished to see me, that is all."

" Oh ! I seem to remember. What did you say you are ?—Preacher, was it ? "

" A schoolmaster—National Schools," said Demas with a faint flush.

" Poor devil ! Well, it's the first time I ever heard of my respected uncle taking an interest in such."

" Lord Maumbury is your uncle ? " Demas looked more closely at his companion, for he had heard of the two brothers with mingled envy and contempt.

The one before him nodded carelessly. He was watching the broad mouth of the amphitheatre, and now pulled out his own elegant watch from its fob with a slightly anxious air.

" You're one of the Mr. Peverells, then."

" The cadet of our worthy house," rejoined the other. " Commonly reported to be the most disreputable member. But I thought you—what the devil are you sighing for ? "

" The air up here is good," said Demas defiantly. " I was not sighing—why should I ? "

" If I were a schoolmaster I'd sigh all day long," retorted Felix Peverell with a light laugh. " I'm sorry for you, on my soul I am."

" I don't ask any man's pity. It—it's a good trade," declared Demas with a ruthless violation of his conscience.

" For fools and old women ! Give me something livelier than that! Though, mind you, a town life has its disadvantages—a cursed lot of 'em. Where is your precious school?"

Demas told him, not very willingly, but the result was utterly unforeseen. Young Peverell's air of condescending ennui immediately vanished; he ceased to drawl; his good-humoured face expressed the liveliest interest. In a moment it was as though the simple word which epitomized to Demas Chaldecott all the inarticulate yearning and rebellion of his life, had, in the other, set loose those natural emotions which worldly superficialities had hidden from common view. He clutched his companion's arm eagerly.

"Parley?" he questioned. "Up in East Dorset? Close to Kinson?"

"That's the place. Why?"

"Then you know her!"

"Whom?"

"Whom? Why, the fair Amazon, the Champion Female Rider, the Boast and Pride of the West Country!"

"Do you mean Miss Bathia Loveridge?"

"Do I mean that incomparable angel? Of course I do! Who else? D'ye mean to say you haven't heard about the wager? 'Tis all over the town this morning."

"The wager concerning Miss Loveridge?"

"What else am I speaking of? I tell you, she and the pretty little bit of horseflesh under her will build up a good many rotten fortunes before a month goes by."

"Yours among others, I suppose?"

"The devil! What's that to do with you? I lay my money where I choose."

"I thought Miss Loveridge lived a retired life," Demas objected. "Are you sure it is the same lady?"

"The one I mean is the daughter of a notorious old pagan who wants to set the world spinning in t'other direction. As to being retired—you must ask my brother. She's his find. He unearthed the damsel in the country when he was hunting over the Maumbury land. She dashed in among 'em and spoilt a very pretty kill. Laid about her like an Amazon, and drove the whole pack off—at least, that's the story. Any other jade would have broken her neck a dozen times, my brother swears. He scented a fortune in her at once, made his bet last night—and by gemini, the thing's as good as done!"

"And she's going to ride for him?"

"Of course she is. And if I were you, I'd give the youngsters a holiday and come and see the fun."

"I'll think it over," said Demas drily. His lips were a trifle fuller than their wont. He had no particular theories about maidenliness or womanhood, but the Loveridge family had made no advance on his arrival in their locality, and this story of a horse-racing young hoyden who was ready to lend her accomplishments for the vicious amusement of a crowd of dissolute young men did not tend to rob the humiliation of its sting. His former mood descended blackly upon him, and his friendliness towards this debonnair scion of his patron's house was replaced by a cold courtesy that was absurd or dignified according to the point of view.

"Going?" asked Felix Peverell. "Don't forget my advice. Lay all you've got on lady Bathia, and get close to the winning-post."

"And supposing," said Demas not without malice, "——supposing the young lady doesn't get to the post first? What then?"

Young Peverell's cheerful face took on a dreary expression.

"Oh, Lord!" he groaned; "that's too awful to contemplate. Damn it, she must win!"

Demas looked contemptuous.

"Well, let her!" he said finally. "'Tis all naught to me. Good day, sir."

The other caught his arm as he was turning away.

"That's your nearest road," he said, and indicated the contrary direction to the one Demas was taking.

Unfamiliar with the locality, the young schoolmaster yielded to Peverell's guidance, parted from him with some return of his former friendliness, and rounded the oval of the amphitheatre. When he had reached the point at which the tiered slopes lost their form in a smooth incline from top to bottom, which point was exactly opposite to the entrance proper on the north-eastern side, he paused to look behind him. Directing his glance towards the spot where he had left his companion, he found that Felix Peverell had descended the high bank, and was now walking rather quickly along the grassy bottom. Before Demas had turned back to pursue his own path there appeared the reason for this sudden decampment, in the shape of a feminine figure which flitted into sight round the curve of the right-hand slope. Demas swung round, as conventionality demanded, but the next moment he obeyed a more human impulse, and looked again. The lady, whoever she might be, was then in Peverell's arms.

"Diana!" breathed the young man.

"Felix! My Felix!" returned she.

And at the other end of the amphitheatre Demas Chaldecott was asking of nothing in particular, why these incomprehensible feminine creatures were for ever rustling their skirts in the ears of any man who was fool enough to listen.

Yet, with the coming of that light-coloured figure into his view, the whisper of the petticoat had already made itself heard on the outskirts of his own life. And that none the less because the owner was another woman than she who now rested in Felix Peverell's embrace. For Life, in spite of sad philosophies, is a sly old humourist, after all, and loves to bring the ultimate effect out of a cause which in its embryo state would elude the discernment of the most percipient scholar whom she owns.

V

THE MIND OF MY LORD

A SHORT time later Demas Chaldecott was standing before Lord Maumbury's Dorchester house, marvelling at its unpretentiousness.

For a man of quality it was decidedly small and plain, and was, in truth, no more than an unimportant appanage originally designed for a spinster of the family. Yet for the present it represented the furthest advance into the world which the ninth earl permitted himself. At rare intervals he left the family seat, and took up his residence in this inadequate domicile, waited upon by only a handful of servants, and dispensing with even the trivial parade which accompanied his rank at Wyke Hall.

It was remarked that he always arrived and departed upon the same day of the calendar in each succeeding year. If he came for diversion, his was a strange choice. He saw no one save an occasional minister of his own sect, and rode abroad alone, in solitary ways.

The house fronted the town on the western side, and by reason of its many windows, set in a plain façade broken only by the usual Georgian portico, had the appearance of keeping a watchful eye upon the comings and goings of the townfolk who neighboured it.

To the musing gaze of the young man who now saw it for the first time it seemed to have caught up some of the characteristics of the present owner. It promised little of comfort—which Demas took to be the structural synonym for human sympathy—and had an unused uncared-for quality in spite of its specious neatness, much as the man behind its walls might be supposed to have neglected the kindlier emotion for all his long array of good works and moral outpourings.

The youthful visitor was disappointed so far in the external trappings of his patron, and this circumstance was sufficient in itself to upset one of his uncertain balance. His temperament dropped quickly from expectation to a point far below that of hope, and not much above mere indifference. Whatever impersonal interest he had felt in the forthcoming interview was reduced to the utmost fractional part compatible with its continuance at all.

A man in plain livery opened the door. Behind him there appeared Parson Willavize in frowning mood. His first words were a rebuke.

"You're ten minutes late," said he. "If there's anything my lord detests, 'tis to be kept waiting."

"I'm sorry," said Demas impenitently. "I was misdirected from the Rings."

"More fool you, then. I told you how to get here. Come along in, for God's sake, and let's get this business over. And remember, my boy, that 'tis sheer against my advice and liking."

He rapped sharply at the door to which he had brought his companion, and opening it pushed the young man into the room. Demas, recollecting in time his distinct obligations to the owner of it, smoothed away the unamiability from his well-favoured face, and advanced with a mien nicely balanced between deference and a modest dignity. With his slim gracefulness, quiet dress, and obvious mental endowments, there was no outward reason why the patron should fail to approve of his protégé. That he did approve was only evidenced by a slight flush that coloured his pallid cheek for an instant, and quickly died away. Yet, in that moment, a spark of genuine emotion was struck from off the stony surface of the man. It was to his friend that he addressed himself.

"Good God, Willavize, you never prepared me for this!"

And the parson, who had been watching them from subtly humorous eyes, rejoined rather drily:

"Would it have induced your lordship to reconsider your determination, if I had?"

Lord Maumbury held out his hand toward Demas, who put his own into it in silence, impressed on the sudden by the grey bleak regretfulness in the elder man's face. He felt himself awed by a tragedy of which he knew nothing, and waited, wondering, for more to be said. When their hands fell apart, the colder of the two was lifted to cover the thin grey face of the man who expected nothing, from the gaze of the youth who looked for all. Presently Lord Maumbury spoke.

"I have two nephews, my sole kith and kin," said he, his eyes still running over the handsome young form before him. "Fine young men, both of them, I am told by those who judge of such things. Yet, as God's my witness, I'd forfeit half the remaining years of my life if you could be called Peverell."

Demas smiled, not altogether pleasantly.

"Indeed, my lord," said he, "I am not much in love with my own name—believe me."

"Go and sit down," said the other abruptly. And when they were seated: "Tell me what you mean."

"Only that the little which I have heard of my father scarcely fills me with filial pride, and I have often wished I were back in the old days when a man had no surname save the one he made for himself."

Lord Maumbury turned to the parson, who seemed to desire no part in the conversation.

"What have you told this young man about his father, Willavize?" he asked.

"Let him tell you himself, my lord," was the short retort.

"Speak out," said the other not ungently. "What do you know of the man your father, Demas Chaldecott?"

"He deserted my mother when I was a couple of years old. I may almost say that I never knew him."

The parson nodded from his corner.

"Very true. Very true. Pretty little snippet of a maid when she wedded the rascal. Died of a broken heart, and left only an ugly little squalling brat to testify to her passage through this wicked world. Well, well! Poor little Dinah!"

"Be silent, Willavize! What good can come of stirring up muddy water?"

"None at all. You're right, my lord. 'Tis what I said all along."

Quite suddenly Lord Maumbury banged his fist down on the table. The action in one apparently so self-contained startled Demas into interest.

"'Fore God, Evurtius, you're trying to turn me from my purpose! Have I not said that I regard my Maker more than the squeamishness of men? Is there not here an immortal soul to be guided and warned—perhaps to be saved? Dare I shrink from that, when the Almighty bids me go on?"

"Oh, go on; go on by all means," assented the parson imperturbably. "I've only one thing more to say. And it's not to you." With a show of earnestness unusual in the man, he got up, crossed to where his young friend sat, and put his hand on his shoulder.

"Demas, I'm on your side always, boy. Remember that."

Then he marched back to his seat, folded his plump hands, and gazed into the fire. The other two might have been alone together.

"Chaldecott," began Lord Maumbury, "have you ever wished to marry?"

"I, my lord? Never."

"Yet you are of an age, I think."

"I am four-and-twenty."

"I judged so. You have formed no attachment to any maid, gentle or simple?"

"I am not, and never have been, in love. 'Tis a foolish business, and one which does not attract me in the least."

"All the better, then, for your peace of mind, young man. It is as I would have it."

"You do not wish me to marry?" said Demas easily. "Rest assured, my lord, that it is the last thing in the world which I contemplate doing. Indeed, I rather pity any woman who should be wife of mine."

But Lord Maumbury neither smiled nor relaxed his steady gaze.

"You mistake me, Chaldecott," said he. "It is the most earnest desire of my heart to see you wedded."

The announcement was unexpected enough to throw Demas momentarily off his balance. Bewilderment overruled nascent rebellion. With a heightened colour he looked across to the parson, and found that worthy cleric frowning at his finger-nails and apparently determined to keep out of the affair. Meanwhile, Lord Maumbury was waiting. Recovering himself, Demas replied.

"I'm sorry, my lord," said he with a kind of deferential obstinacy. "But I cannot oblige you in this."

The refusal, it would appear, was as unlooked-for on Lord Maumbury's part as the proposal had been to the speaker. The deep-set eyes took on a look of steady purpose. He, too, glanced across at Willavize, and, like Demas, got no help from there.

"State your objection," he said quietly.

"There are a hundred reasons against it," cried Demas. "To begin with—the notion does not chime in with my inclination."

The thin grey eyebrows went up at that, pointing an obvious rejoinder which Demas was too honest to ignore. It was the old argument—the potency of which he had acknowledged on the previous night.

"I understand very well, too well, perhaps, for my own comfort," he protested, "under what deep obligations I must always be to your lordship. Parson Willavize will bear witness to that——"

The other turned suddenly. A look which seemed to go beyond disappointment or anger lined his thin features as he cried out—

"Is this so, Willavize? Is this youth as grateful as he affects to be?"

"Settle it between yourselves, my lord. I wash my hands of it entirely. I've told you my opinion already."

Lord Maumbury pressed his slender fingers together and brought his gaze back to the obstinate young face on the other side of the table.

"I have not asked anything of you as yet," he said with a kind of sad gentleness.

"I know that, my lord. On the other hand, I must remind you that this is the first time I have set my wishes against yours. I have followed the course you planned for me, studied what you desired, adopted the calling of your choosing. You ordered me to Parley schoolhouse—I went, and though I have grown to hate the place, I have remained, since it was your bidding. But I am afraid you will tempt me to regret my compliance if it has led you to expect obedience in the matter which you have just proposed."

"You refuse to please me in this thing, then?"

Demas, wavering between irritation and regret, bent his head.

"My duty to myself and to any woman I might marry, forbids it," he said.

Lord Maumbury rose, took a turn round the room, with a sharp glance at the imperturbable parson as he passed, and halted before his young visitor's chair.

"Let your mind rest easy on that point," said he. "The marriage which I desire is not to be of your choosing, nor, indeed, of mine. The Lord Himself hath revealed it to me."

Demas, on his feet also, shoulder to shoulder with his benefactor, moved impatiently.

"Do not scoff at Divine leading," said Lord Maumbury with the solemnity of a fanatic. "When I tell you the truth, you will be content to bow your stubborn head in perfect submission."

Across the forbidding gravity of the speaker's voice and manner, the parson sent a cry of warning.

"My lord, for God's sake, have a care!"

"Evurtius, shall I cease at your bidding, when the Almighty has laid this thing upon me?"

"Very well, my lord. Go on, and be damned to you!"

The nobleman laid a steady hand on the young man's shoulder, and looked down into the sullen depths of his eyes.

"You have seen the girl Julia Trickett. Wait. She it is whom the Lord has chosen for your mate. Only by this union can an old wrong be set right; and the curse of blood be redeemed."

"The curse of blood?" repeated Demas, uneasy and staring.

"Yes. The maid now harboured in Willavize's household was orphaned by your father's hand."

Into the startled silence that followed the parson's voice again struck, with a kind of bitter flippancy.

"Now go down on your knees, Demas Chaldecott, and give praise that the Lord has spoken in the person of His unworthy servant Maumbury. Know yourself for the offspring of a murderer, and rejoice in the truth always!"

Demas swung round in passionate appeal.

It was to Parson Willavize that he turned for corroboration or denial—a fact not lost upon the man who had made the revelation.

"Is this true, sir?" he demanded to be told. "Is this monstrous story possible?"

"My lord's no liar," was the laconic reply. And again—"Settle it between yourselves."

"Is it true?" asked Demas, his startled eyes now focussing upon Lord Maumbury's withered features.

"Before the God whom I serve, young man, it is."

There was a moment's silence. Demas flung himself into a chair. He leant an elbow on the table, and his chin in his hand, and kept his smouldering eyes on the carpet between his knees.

"A mistake, my lord," muttered Parson Evurtius sagely.

Lord Maumbury neither answered his friend nor hurried the young fellow before him. Quite quietly he waited. Presently Demas raised his head.

" And you have told me this," he asked, " in order to induce me to comply with your wishes? "

" I have."

A little smile curved the firm young lips. Demas went on—

" My lord, you have lived much out of the world, I understand. I have never lived in it. Yet even to my raw perceptions it is clear that such a history as you have generously provided me with is not an asset likely to be valued by a woman in her husband."

Lord Maumbury flushed beneath the civil satire of the young fellow's words. Yet he did not rebuke the insolence, but answered with the mildness of manner which cloaked his most earnest utterances.

" I understand that the young woman is no fool, and is of Christian principles "—the parson, rather red in the face, snorted in his corner—" To her the union that I have urged, yea, and do still urge, will be the natural healing of an ancient wound; even as to you, Demas Chaldecott, it should be the God-given opportunity to repair the harm caused by your father's grievous sin."

" My father's sins," retorted Demas, " were to himself alone. I refuse to accept the responsibility of them."

" Have a care," said the other, looking pained and disappointed, " lest you add sins of your own in thus wilfully turning aside from the means of Grace. The Almighty Himself—— "

But at this point the parson heaved himself out of his chair, and came forward.

" Look here, Maumbury," said he, " just leave the Almighty out of the business. It's even betting that He hasn't had a finger in it, after all. Oh, damn your sour looks, my lord, I'm going to speak. Ask yourself this : is it fair that Demas should be forced into a loveless marriage because his father was as big a rascallion as we know him to have been? And if it's hard on him, 'tis ten times more so on the girl. Demas don't love her; that's plain; and I'm sure "—here the speaker's voice became so dry that it might have been supposed that the huge pinch of rappee which he had just conveyed to his nostrils had gone down his throat instead—" I'm sure, I say, there's no earthly reason to suppose Julia's in love with him. Now "—his appreciative eyes ran over the handsome young fellow from heel to head—" why the devil should she be? "

Demas, flushing partly with anger, partly with embarrassment, sent his voice athwart the elder man's.

"What you have told me, my lord," said he, "makes no difference to my feelings. I thank you, as I must always thank you, for your kindly interest in me, but I cannot obey you in this."

Lord Maumbury's face set in rigid lines. Across its pallor an unhealthy bluish tinge was creeping. He caught his breath before speaking.

"You refuse me, then, the first direct request I have ever asked of you?"

An impulse of contrition swayed across the hot young heart bent on its denial. But the refusal was repeated as firmly as before.

"You are well-named," said his lordship with some bitterness. "Demas. '*Demas hath forsaken me.*' Have you forgotten the result? We hear no more of Demas."

"I am sorry——" began the young man, but left off speaking to lean forward hurriedly towards the earl, upon whose now pinched features the wan hues of some sudden seizure had spread unmistakably. The parson gripped the sufferer and led him to a chair.

"'Tis nothing, nothing," gasped he a moment later. "'Tis only the Lord's reminder that my abiding city is not on earth; and He knows that I have sought that other with wrestlings and tears."

Willavize motioned Demas forward. He spoke to him a little roughly, as his manner was when events had moved him out of his naturally easy-going ways.

"Make your farewells to his lordship," he said. "The whole business has had small profit for anyone. But it wasn't by my desire."

Lord Maumbury held out his hand. It fell flaccid and cold into the warm young grasp of Demas Chaldecott—the hand of a man already sought for by Death. His sunken eyes glowed up into the face which had set itself with such unexpected firmness against his desire. It was a moment rife with conjectural emotion, and if the youth's decision could suffer any weakening it must needs be at this thin second of time.

Yet it passed, and he made no sign. Seeing which, the parson plucked up heart of grace, forgave the good looks which might well play havoc with a young maid's fancy, and bore his charge away with a brusqueness of manner which indicated that the backwash of memory had momentarily ruffled the placidity of a conscience more prone to philosophize with Horace than to animadvert with Paul.

VI

PARLEY PARISH

The parish of Parley was a small and scattered one situated in the extreme north-west of Dorset. A pastoral visitation occurred on an average about twice a year. During the intervals the church, a small stone structure of great antiquity and well-nigh impenetrable darkness, remained closed against all comers.

The living was in the gift of the Earl of Maumbury, who was also the chief landowner in these parts. Rumour had it that Parson Willavize held every benefice which that same lordly patron could bestow. When curiosity was stirred, this particularly neglected flock applied to one Jeremiah Puddy—gardener by trade, church functionary by choice, and misanthrope by nature—for confirmation of the hearsay. Whereupon Jeremiah would sum up the situation thus :

"They do tell I as my lard be a-tarned over to they Methodies; so a' reckon he doän't care a tinker's curse where Mother Church do goo to."

It might have been the explanation, but whether or no, Parson Willavize throve wondrously on the great man's crumbs, and continued to be the absentee incumbent of the living of Parley, which comprised a hundred odd pounds of endowment, a decent dwelling-house, and some eighty acres of fair glebe, together with the cure of as few souls as any self-respecting parson could desire to have in his parochial keeping.

In spite of his genuine distaste for the neighbourhood, the parson had kept his word and returned with Demas Chaldecott on his departure from Dorchester. He had eyed the young fellow with a shy sort of anxiety during the return journey. But though he had expected many questions, he had been asked but few. Thereupon he had assumed an attitude of careless reticence, alternately cursing Lord Maumbury for his indiscreet revelation, and blessing his young companion for his sensitive reserve on the matter.

The day after their return was clear and crisp, one of those days when the declining year, like a fading woman, tricks itself out in the seductive trappings of a more brilliant period. Overhead, the skies showed as azure as in early June; the air was warmer than in mid-May, and if a trail of misty and gossamer had hung along the river-bank earlier in the day, it had vanished beneath a sunshine still brilliant enough to send the parson's hat down over his eyes.

Before these same eyes—complacent, humorous, worldly, the eyes of a man who thought before he spoke, and then suffered his over-full lips to utter only one half of what lay in his mind—there stretched a prospect of rich park-like meadows across a river of some depth and volume. Nearer at hand he looked out upon a narrow bit of roadway, bordered by a ragged hedge—both of which ended abruptly a few yards further to the left, the road becoming a mere foot-track across the adjoining pastures and the hedge ceasing altogether. It was as though the lane, for it was little more, having served its purpose in conducting the pedestrian to the ancient wooden-steepled church which topped a slight rise in the ground beyond the parson's elbow, could find nothing else to do, and perished weakly for lack of justification in continuing.

Two habitations of the living neighboured the abiding-place of the dead—the cottage which sheltered Jeremiah Puddy, and the parsonage itself. A long flat-fronted building, its severity broken only by a vine-covered porch, it bore no external evidence of the dignity assigned to it, its air of secularity being aided by the fact that what should have been gardens and lawns existed only as a disused farm-yard. Empty and dilapidated sheds, broken styes, and a soil of beaten mud, now sun-dried and hard, formed a desolation well-nigh as intense as the dank and over-grown churchyard which lay on the other side of the boundary wall.

The parson, who had wisely turned his back upon the pig-styes, was interrupted in his enjoyment of the fairer prospect by a footstep behind him. Turning, he found Demas at his elbow. The few days of holiday allowed for his visit to Dorchester had not yet run out, and he was freed from his occupation until the end of the week.

"You might make a tolerable little place of it, you know, Demas," said the parson with a circumambient wave of his churchwarden. "You might cultivate it between you—you and Jerry. Grow flowers . . . and vegetables."

Demas looked gloomy.

"I can't grow things," he said. "I've not the knack. I've tried scores of times. My pansies straggle, my roses are blighted, my sweet peas won't bloom."

"Try cabbages. Or potatoes," said the parson briskly.

Demas shook his head.

"Worse and worse, sir."

"Why?"

"Because the gift isn't in me."

"Tchut! It ought to be in you, lad. Think of the generations of agriculturists that are behind you. Have you got nothing from them?"

He glanced at his companion in time to see him wince.

"I would prefer, I think," said Demas, his dark cheek on fire, "to forget my ancestors, each and all of them."

It was the first reference which he had made to the grim fact which Lord Maumbury had revealed with such merciless sincerity. The parson let his worldly eyes rest upon him. Then he put out a hand and laid it affectionately on the young man's shoulder.

"Demas," he said, between the puffs of his pipe, "I wouldn't let that tale worry me if I were you. That it's a damned ugly one I won't deny, but no one knows it hereabouts, and you've a fine pair of legs of your own to stand upon."

The flush had sobered in Demas's cheek, but his eyes were hot and smouldering.

"Why did my lord tell me?" he demanded suddenly.

The parson blew clouds of smoke across the roadway. They hung awhile in the still air, assuming fantastic shapes, then dissipated in filmy shreds of vapour. When the atmosphere was clear of the last trail, he spoke.

"My lord gave you a reason," he said mildly. "Doesn't that suffice?"

Demas shrugged his shoulders.

"It was an argument beyond yourself," said he.

"True, true. I didn't want you told the story at all."

With a singularly expressive gesture the young schoolmaster thrust his hand into his friend's. The parson squeezed it warmly; perhaps because something seemed to be squeezing his conscience at that moment.

After a pause Demas asked:

"My father—what became of him?"

"Died," said Willavize laconically.

"I understand that. But how?"

"Not as you think, lad," flashed out the other quickly. It was remarkable how, on occasion, this complacent and easy-going man could assume both decisiveness and dignity. "He left the country and died in Flanders. That was proved long ago."

"It is not true, then, that he deserted my mother voluntarily?"

"No. He had to fly for his life."

"Did she know the truth?"

"I am not sure whether she guessed it."

" And Julia, does she know? "

" Certainly not! " cried Willavize tartly. " D'ye think I'd blight an innocent young life with a gloomy tale like that? Have you any more questions to put, you young sinner? "

" One. Is Lord Maumbury going to tell her? "

" Not if I have any say in the matter! 'Tis bad enough for you to know. Julia and midnight murder indeed! "

Demas made no immediate response. He let his gaze travel in a ruminative way across the wide range of distant meadows. As he looked, almost unconsciously his eyes focussed themselves upon a moving object some half-mile away. The parson was not long in discovering this also, and together they watched the rapidly moving speck. So fast was its progress, in truth, that it appeared rather as a blur or streak of ruddy colour flung across the predominant verdant and dun of the landscape. In a few seconds a sharp change of direction, imperceptible at the instant, brought the object momentarily nearer. It was now coming towards them, showing as the one impulsive force in a scene that was as calm and passionless as a landscape by a Dutch master. Less than half-a-minute passed, and the ruddy blur began to take shape, finally resolving itself, at the distance of some thirty feet beyond the hedgerow, into the forms of a woman and a horse. The rider wore a scarlet habit; the animal was a bright bay; hence the vivid admixture of colour when seen at a distance.

" Miss Loveridge, " pronounced the parson, rubbing his chin.

" So Puddy tells me."

The assent was given coolly, even indifferently, and it had brought the elder man's eyes round to his companion's face with an interrogatory glance, when a sudden animation of the passive scrutiny which was all that he at first observed, sent his own gaze back to the fields. His lips tightened to a soundless whistle.

" The young devil!—she'll break her lily-white neck! "

Again the rider had changed her course. Moving in an oblique track, she was obviously making for the corner where the hedge that separated Jeremiah Puddy's garden from the meadow joined that which bordered the high road. Taking into account the bank which supported the hedge on this side, the leap was not to be reckoned at less than a dozen feet, the fall into the roadway, owing to the inequality of the ground, being even greater. In the instantaneous period of hesitation which follows a sudden alarm, a new danger was added to the rider's daring. The animal beneath the flapping red skirts began to curvet and prance wickedly. Both men instinctively ran down the garden path, Parson Willavize clapping his hands to his round O of a mouth, and roaring like a bull of Bashan.

"Have a care, maidy! The devil 'll damned well break your neck!"

Thus Parson Evurtius, all his red blood aglow and tingling to the remembrance of his own glorious dare-devilry in the field; while the lad at his side spared his breath, and vaulting over the low garden gate ran out into the roadway.

The girl on the horse had thrown up her head and squared her shoulders. Her mouth showed like a budding peony through the drying twigs of the hedgerow as she came rapidly on and put her mount to the jump. On the imaginative side, the moment had but one parallel, and such a thought rushed vividly through the mind of the young man in the road below, who now found himself shouting incoherently. To him, the girl's career was as the last splendid rush of a meteor in its moment of extinction.

But the end of Bathia Loveridge was not to be yet. Young Demas Chaldecott's excited eyes beheld her stoop slightly in her saddle, and then a great brilliant wave rose over the hedge and broke with a roar and a tumult at his side. So near, in truth, was he that he felt the impact on the ground like a physical blow, was cooled by the swift rush of air, and smothered from crown to heel by the dusty spray.

A sudden dizziness seized him. He reeled, and struck by that which he would avoid, went sprawling on to the grassy margin of the roadway. By the time that he had picked himself up, the girl had galloped out of sight. With a cooled enthusiasm for the splendour of her daring, he flicked the dust from shoulders and knees.

"Hurt, eh?" asked the parson, recovering his wind, and mopping a red excited face as he strolled up to the young fellow.

"No."

"Dash the jade!—she might have waited to inquire."

"Just what I was thinking, sir."

"Think she noticed you?"

"Why, she must have seen the pair of us," said Demas with irate conviction.

And Bathia Loveridge remained as an unpleasant impression in a mind prone to violent prejudice for or against.

"Well," said the elder man, ending an uncomfortable pause, " since you've not suffered by the hussy's mad prank —which I praise God for—let's go in to breakfast."

Although originally built as the parsonage, the domicile had, with the development of the National Schools movement, come to serve as school-house as well, while the more habital portion had been set aside as a residence for the young functionary to whom the training of the scattered youth of the district was entrusted. Demas Chaldecott passed an existence of outward regularity and inward turmoil, desiring he scarcely knew what, and suffering not least from the fact that his isolation forced him into an introspective survey of his somewhat unfortunate position.

During the morning the parson wandered off alone with a gun under his arm, leaving Demas, to whom all forms of sport were abhorrent, to make what use he pleased of his temporary freedom. There being small choice of relaxation within these sparsely populated wilds, the young man occupied himself with duties which should better have devolved upon the clerical shoulders now supporting an antiquated fowling-piece. At mid-day he sent Jeremiah Puddy into the adjacent village of Kinson to procure a length of rope to replace the frayed fragment which he himself had just removed from the belfry of the ancient church. A speedy return, as he impressed upon his factotum, would enable them to fix it in position before darkness, which fell several hours earlier in the church than elsewhere, prevented their labours.

Two o'clock came, and Jeremiah had not returned. Demas, in a supersensitive state of restlessness owing to recent events, grew irritable and impatient. Finally, when another half-hour had crept by, he read into Puddy's delay a wilful defiance of his authority, and set out to look for the delinquent.

The warmth and brilliance of the earlier part of the day had declined, but the air was still clear and pleasant enough to render walking in itself a delight. With a recklessness little short of daring in days when the laws of property were stringently enforced, Demas soon left the lane-like road that wound down to the church, leapt the dry ditch, clambered up the bank and found a passage for his slim young body through the hedge a-top. Then entering upon the Maumbury estate, he struck into a barely distinguishable track across the grassy levels, emerging after some twenty minutes' brisk walking at a point which bordered the highroad.

Jeremiah was not in sight. But Demas could give a shrewd guess as to where he might be found. With growing irritation he sprang down into the roadway, and was immediately forced to draw back nearly into the ditch, for a carriage of some pretention, driven by a postilion in livery, rattled past his ears at close range.

The vehicle was open, and inside it Demas recognized the figure of Squire Loveridge of Kinson Place. The cold eyes of the elder man met those of the pedestrian with the indifferent glance of a philosopher as the carriage swept him by.

VII

GOSSIPS ALL

THE highroad itself was a solitary place save at rare intervals. As it stretched its length to join, at a distance of some twenty miles, the inland town of Wimborne to the seaport of Poole, it boasted of few villages and inns to break the tedium of the journey for the wayfarer. Although it was a fact that at both of these two towns might be found houses of entertainment in plenty, thirsty travellers and dust-choked postboys were prone to hold up to the wrath of heaven the singular lack of the places whence to procure the revivifying refreshment which their throats demanded.

In the sandy wastes through which the road dragged itself when within sound of the sea nothing much was to be expected, but on the higher levels, and among country of a purely pastoral description, better things were usually sought for—and not found until, close to the village of Kinson, the jolting coach or curvetting chaise turned a corner suddenly and the glories of a dingy yellow stucco building burst upon the sight.

Owing to the sparsity of its rivals, *The Horse and Jockey Inn* had gathered to itself a vast deal of credit and a considerable amount of custom, both gregarious and residential. Because others were not, it throve, and its reputation spread. Nor was it solely on account of the excellence of its various beverages that it was of good report in the countryside. It had established for itself by dint of much gossip, some exaggeration, and a little lying, the character of the chief news exchange of the district.

There was no season so slack nor any weather too bad to interfere with this back-door business of the place. So jealous, in truth, and so zealous withal, did the habitual frequenters become, that at length they fell into ways as pernicious as unusual in a rustic community. The bar-parlour, which however crowded by village-folk of an evening, might have been expected to entertain only the travellers by road during the daylight hours, now seldom lacked some representative of the locality long before the legitimate time for his beer-bibbing. Any excuse served; and the thickest skull is generally receptive enough to such flashes of imagination. At the weakest, a field labourer crossing from one fallow to another would enter the inn merely because it happened to stand in his way.

Regarded visually, it was not an attractive place. A square block of a building, lacking the seductive charm of gables, dormer casements, porch seats, rambling stairways and inglenooks, it faced the roadside with an almost vacuous look about its flat front and plain unornamented windows.

Nor did the ochreous colouring of its walls improve its appearance. On a sultry day of summer it glared against the green of its pastoral background. When the mists rose on early autumn mornings from the adjacent river, and it appeared to exude moisture from its smooth surface, it loomed with a melancholy wanness that matched the veiled sun overhead. And when the country around it glistened with hoarfrost or newly-fallen snow, it stood an ugly yellow blot on the purity of the world at large.

But such as it was it drew as with a magnet the leisurely feet of Jeremiah Puddy, when, having procured the length of rope which had formed his errand to Kinson, he came within its dangerous radius on his return journey. A stretch of imagination alone could have declared that the inn lay anywhere near the direct path of the slow-moving sexton, but it was near enough to offer a distinct temptation. Jeremiah, to whom bursts of rhetoric were not unknown, was wont to state that the fragrance of its home-brewed met his eager nostrils a full mile away.

This particular afternoon being neither warm enough to induce a reasonable thirst, nor chilly enough to suggest the comfort of mulled ale, Jeremiah inversely found an adequate excuse in the negative quality of the season, arguing with some skill that when the weather wa'n't het enough for cold eäle, a man med call hisself a fool for not drinking it spiced, and when the air were too muggy for mulling, then a fool were he as 'ouldn't drink it in its nat'ral state.

With the result that at the time when Demas Chaldecott began to throw his first tentative glances out-of-door, Jeremiah was turning in at *The Horse and Jockey*.

The bar-parlour already had company, the component members of which were either old antagonists or old cronies of the sexton. A coach had passed along that morning, changing horses at the inn, and the fact had sufficed to gather every available idler from the two hamlets within its walls.

Jeremiah made his way to his customary seat amid the silent greetings of his friends. Dropping himself upon it, he flung his coil of rope into the corner beside him, and nodded to the others.

"There!" said he, eyeing the rope misanthropically; "danged if I ha'n't had enough o' he. As I coome staggen alang wi' thik load, think I— 'Tes a blessen o' Providence as Passon don't coome no often 'an thrice to year.' Such a blather an' a werreten as a' do make, to be sure."

"'Tes so," agreed George Damon the hurdlemaker. And all the company turned slow heads to stare at the load aforesaid. One of them stooped down to finger the coil, but Jeremiah, church dignitary that he was, intervened hastily.

"Nay, nay," cried he, "kep' your ten commandments off of he, Thomas Sprake. 'Tes holy property, that be, my lad; not for such as ye to meddle wi'!"

"An' what med it be for, now?"

"'Tes meant for church tower o' Sunday, to call arl ye ungodly sinners in to praise the Lard."

"An' I don't know as we be girter sinners than some as I could name," objected a swarthy-faced fellow whose bare arms and leather apron betrayed his occupation.

Jeremiah lifted his pot of ale, nodded to his friends, and scowled at the last speaker.

"Ah, now," struck in a small rosy-cheeked old man in a corner, with the amiable intention of averting a quarrel, "'tisn't here nor there that we should be looking for sinners, with such a heathen as Squire Loveridge in our midst."

With the unanimity of comrades in a common cause, all faces grew grave, yet not distressfully so, for the notoriety of their local great man was a thing not to be despised.

"To think o' it!" remarked one. "'Tes a shocking thing that such a girt an' powerful man should say his prayers to the devil, as they do tell me Squire do every neäght o' his life."

"An' some day," said Jeremiah, motioning to the landlord to replenish his tankard, "some day—you mark me, naybo'rs arl—he'll fall down dead, struck so by act o' God, while he's a-sayen of 'em."

"Onless he get convarted," timidly suggested a meek man known, by the inversion of his nomenclature, as Loving William.

"Tidden likely," growled the blacksmith, with an eye for Puddy, whom he persisted in regarding as the squire's natural champion by reason of his position as head gardener up at the Place.

"An' be that anyways so?" asked Thomas Sprake, of the same functionary.

Jeremiah shook his head.

"'Tesn't for me to say," he affirmed. "Most likely he'll be cut off in's sins."

And he appeared to find the possibility so exceedingly dismal that he gave the order for more ale almost without thinking.

"We do hear a deal nowadays," said the hurdlemaker, "o' convarsion, and just what it do rightly mean I never couldn't tell. Must be a powerful sart of thing to turn a man all to once from a hell-fire rascal to a chap as mealy-mouthed and saft afore the Lard as Loving William here."

"'Tes act o' God," replied Jeremiah, repeating a favourite phrase of his.

"Well then, why doän't He wark wi' the same smartness on a rotten stick? Manys the time as they snaps across my knee so easy as looken, an', thinks I, 'There be waste!' For a stick as won't sarve as spar-gad to a hurdle ben't no use for naught."

"Jarge Damon," said Puddy, "ye be a girt numbskull. D'ye think as the Lard A'mighty's gooen to show off His tricks like a tumbler at a fair to such a onbelievin' chap as 'ee?"

"What I had in my mind," pursued the hurdlemaker, "is this. There's Lard Maumb'ry now. Not as I ever clapt eyen on him; but there a' reckon he be. From what I do hear now, aforetime he were so sober and pious a churchman as passon hisself. Well, coome to pass he thinks better o' such saintly things, seemin'ly, an' turns roun' an' gives the church the goo-by. Methody he be now, they tells I, an' not woone of us can't say as he ben't. An' a'ter tarnen his nobleman's back on all godly things, he do up an' say as he's got convarted! How do that fit in, Jeremiah? Can 'ee tell me for why?"

"Ah!" said Lush the blacksmith with gusto, fixing Puddy with an inimical eye.

"Course I can," said the sexton at once. By this time he had imbibed several pots of the home-brewed, but his mental faculties were clarified rather than otherwise by the process, albeit his legs were assuming easy attitudes. "Course I can. Now lookye here, naybo'rs arl. Stan's to reason, doän't it?—that when a girt nobleman same as my lard do get convarted, he ben't a-gooen to do it same as a common feller like Joe Lush or Jarge Damon 'ould. No, by blazes! He do it in a finer fashion 'an that, an' no doubt the A'mighty do think arl the better o' him for 't. Now, ben't I right, Mr. Oddy, sir?"

The rosy-faced little man in the corner nodded amiably and indulgently. It being well known that Jeremiah Puddy with a drap o' eäle in's inside was a martel hard chap to argy with.

"If Parson Willavize is satisfied," added he, "'tisn't in nature for us not to be. They be gre't friends, I hear."

Jeremiah confirmed the statement with an air of authority. He was apt to claim something for himself on the strength of the intimacy which existed between his intermittent master and the great man whose huge rent-roll was swelled by the exertions of these, Puddy's humble neighbours. At times, when the ale was particularly strong, he had been known to declare that by rights he ought to be wearing the Maumbury livery.

"And the young chap, now?" asked Mr. Josiah Oddy. "How do he and parson get on together?"

"Like a pair o' thieves bound for the same gallus," declared Puddy. Demas Chaldecott he served without ardour. Little glory could come of his desultory attendance upon an impecunious and obscure village schoolmaster. Moreover, the young man had been at no pains to conceal his dissatisfaction with his man-of-all-work.

"And is it true that parson took Mr. Chaldecott down to see his lordship?" asked the genial little farmer.

"Ay. Trew enough, Mr. Oddy, sir. An' a tearen black sart o' a temper the young man coome hwome in. 'Twas him as sent me a'sweaten a'ter thik rope so soon as the wold man's back were tarned. 'An' can'les, too,' says he; 'mind you doän't forget the can'les'—the holy place bein' that danged dark at mid-day, as ye do know. But there, Lard sakes! forgot 'em I hev, an' they'll ha' to do the best they can wi'out 'em, a' reckon."

Some little time after this declaration of independence, the door of the bar-parlour was pushed open, and the tall figure of Demas Chaldecott appeared. In the interim, conversation had flagged, reviving temporarily when the carriage of Squire Loveridge was seen to pass by, and afterwards declining to a succession of "ah's" and "ay's," delivered with an emphasis that increased with every repetition, the process being continued until long after the object of comment or assent had faded from the mind.

It was unfortunate that Demas was not in the mood to deal gently with his delinquent messenger; unfortunate, too, that Jeremiah, having imbibed large quantities of ale, both hot and cold, was not minded to submit to the indignity of a public reprimand. The consciousness of his young master's approach was borne in upon his drowsing senses by a firm grip on his shoulder and the utterance of his name, very loud and angry, in his ear.

"Jeremiah!"

And immediately the sexton was wide awake, open-mouthed and staring.

"Meäster Chaldecott, sir!"

Then the young schoolmaster gave a verbal exhibition of the temper that was in him—the whole forming a heedless and uncontrolled indictment of Jeremiah Puddy's ways and misdemeanours from the beginning of his present service until this last particular betrayal of trust. Glib of tongue, and therefore expending upon the trivial incident an eloquence fitter for greater issues, Demas belaboured Jeremiah with words of reproach and sarcasm until he had in some measure worked off his own secretion of riotous and rebellious emotions. Which done, he quieted down in his characteristically sudden fashion, and pointing to the coil of rope ordered Puddy to pick it up forthwith and to follow him.

This Jeremiah flatly refused to do.

"Why not?" demanded Demas.

"'Cos I ben't a-goen to risk my neck in that rotten wold belfry at this time o' day," replied the sexton doggedly.

"Whose fault is it that the task's been left so late?" retorted the other.

"Well, it med be mine an' it med be yourn, sir. Anyways, into that there death-trap o' a moulderen tower I doän't stir to-day."

"Stop your insolence! To-morrow's Sunday——"

"I knows that so well as you."

"——and Mr. Willavize wants to hold service."

"A' reckon he can do that wi'out a bell nor rope nayther. Thy tongue, young meäster, be so good a clapper as ever I hear arl the days o' my martel life."

"You insolent rascal!" Demas's hand clenched, and his cheek flushed darkly, but the next moment he had curbed his rising passion, and stooping, caught up the coil of rope and tossed it over his shoulder. Without another word to Puddy, he turned to go.

But by now the rest of the company, having recovered from the stultifying effects of the young fellow's tirade, had aroused to a sense of a vanishing opportunity. The ruling passion awoke. Here was one newly returned from the outside world, rife with tidings, it might be, of the doings of all and sundry in those far-away parts. Thomas Sprake voiced the nascent longing of the rest when he spoke.

"Talken o' news, sir," he began—though none had been doing so since Demas's arrival—"med you ha' heard any such down to Darchester, now?"

The tones were inconsequent, but expectation was in the air. Demas paused impatiently.

"I didn't go there to learn news," said he.

"That wa'n't my meanen, sir—leastways——"

"What do you want to know?"

"His noble lardship, now. Do the pore wold gen'leman keep in good health?"

"Fair," said Demas with a darkening brow.

"Lwonesome wold man, I reckon," remarked the hurdlemaker tentatively.

"Possibly. I can't say."

"Neither wife not chile, they do tell I. Lar', 'tis funny now. To think o' such a girt man as that wi'out a fam'ly. Why, lookyee here, sir, when I wants to tell my children, I can't never do it onless I've a-got 'em standen round—so many as they be! An' that girt nobleman wi'out woone!"

Demas looked back, with his hand on the door. Remembrance struck across his brooding mind, and needed to go no farther back than the same morning to gain life and colour. A girl in a flame-coloured habit, with a mouth like a flower and a wrist like steel, and eyes that merely glinted on his dusty fall, before she fled away, thereby flicking his abraised spirit to a fresh rawness. A little malice warmed his voice as he answered the hurdlemaker from the open doorway.

"Lord Maumbury has nephews," he told the company. "Rather gay young men, I understand. Miss Loveridge has promised to ride in a race against all the foremost jockeys of the day, for these gentlemen's benefit. They've backed the young lady for many thousands of pounds. They say it will make a great stir among the dandies in town."

"Lard sakes! Squire's darter? Miss Bathia?" chorused the company.

"Miss Bathia," affirmed Demas, speaking the name without relish. He hitched the coil of rope into position over his shoulder, and stepping from the room left the group of rustics to their ale and gossiping—with no suspicion that he himself had been the most careless gossip of them all.

VIII

A NEW USE FOR A BELL-ROPE

THE next caller at the inn was Squire Loveridge, who stopped his horses at its door on his return journey, some ten minutes after Demas Chaldecott had left it.

The man was not popular. In no class of society could he have been that, for his very intimates, by reason of their being such, were not men given to enthusiasms of any kind. Cold, self-contained, immobile, judging all things by reason, repelling emotion in others as he had annihilated it in himself, he moved among his homely neighbours a man apart—in actual essence, a creature of another sphere, and an inorganic bloodless world at that. In practice, he was a theorist; in theory, the most rigorous practitioner of them all.

To reform, to reduce the government of nations and of individuals alike to a severe organization set on a philosophic and reasonable basis, was the airy ambition of the man. Yet, beyond the ruling of his own household, nothing had been accomplished—and he had devoted some five-and-thirty years of life to this empty achievement. He wrote many pamphlets, dabbled in chemistry, lectured occasionally, and read omnivorously of ancient and modern philosophy.

No one could charge him with charlatanism; no one who touched him in the ordinary give-and-take of everyday life had any reason to complain of his conduct. He had induced two women to accept his name and share his life, and the second of these was a firm if somewhat sour upholder of the tenets which he had long ago discarded—the apparent inconsistency between rule and practice in this instance having, in reality, a sounder basis than a mere acceding to the prejudice of conviction would have implied. He had married his second wife because Reason had indicated her as a fit mistress for his household.

But in spite of much that was worthy in itself and blameless before men it was difficult to conceive of Timon Loveridge being loved or even liked. His cold grey eye, his level tones, his measured gait, all induced involuntary distrust—if not, in truth, a warmer feeling of antagonism.

It followed, therefore, that his intrusion into any circle of society was marked by an immediate restraint and silence, often so compelling as to induce the feeling of physical cold.

It so happened when, on this particular afternoon, he pushed open the door of the bar-parlour, and loomed forbidding and grim upon the rustic intelligences there assembled. Additional awkwardness was given to his entry by the fact that the subject under discussion, thus suddenly interrupted, was the piece of news imparted by the last comer.

As the squire had appeared among them before they were well aware of his arrival there was hardly a doubt that he had overheard their remarks. But at first he made no sign. His business was with Matt Vidler, the landlord, and he settled it at leisure before taking any heed of the other occupants of the room. It was only when he was going that he bestowed a look on them.

"I fancied—it was probably only fancy; indeed, I cannot believe it to have been more——" he said, "that I heard you mention the name of a member of my family, as I entered. Was it so?"

"We was spaken o' Miss Bathia, sir," mumbled the hurdlemaker, out of dead silence. "No offence, I hopes, sir."

"My daughter. Ha!—and what of her, pray?"

"Jes' nothen, sir—pleäse your honour, sir."

"Pray be reasonable. No man speaks of a woman in order to say nothing about her. What was it?"

"Well, sir," ventured one at length, "we was on'y talken o' the queer tale as young schoolmeäster did tell to we."

Squire Loveridge's placid brow suffered no change. But he turned his back full upon the door, and came farther into the room.

"A queer tale about my daughter," he repeated. "Related by a young man. Pray proceed."

"'Twas about Lard Maumb'ry's young gen'lemen, your worship," stammered Loving William, happening to catch the cold light of the squire's eye as it glinted over the company.

"Lord Maumbury's nephews, you mean. Yes. Go on. What has my daughter to do with them?"

"Nothen, your honour. On'y, schoolmeäster were tellen we as how she'd promised to ride in a girt reäce to win 'em shovelfuls o' golden wealth. An' we were sayen what a tar'ble brave thing it were for a dandy young maid like Miss Bathia to do."

Squire Loveridge directed his glance towards the only well-to-do man in the room—Farmer Oddy—and addressed him crisply.

"Is the fellow speaking the truth?" he asked.

"I can't say as he's not, sir," replied the farmer, waxing redder of cheek than before.

"Tell me yourself."

"There's naught to tell, squire, save what William says. Mr. Chaldecott were in here a few moments back, and gave us the news as Miss Bathia was going to race against all the famous riders o' the day, for the 'vantage and credit of Mr. Gervis Peverell and his brother. I don't know no more 'an that, sir—'cept that he did say as there were lots o' money in it for all the gay young sparks up to town."

The face of Squire Loveridge became waxy pale, but there was no quavering in the cool tones when he spoke next.

"The story," he said, "reflects more credit upon the imagination of Mr. Chaldecott than upon my family. Understand that I am greatly displeased. Mr. Oddy, will you do me the favour to contradict the report should you hear it again. As for the rest of you—if I learn that one of you has repeated this grossly libellous statement, he will have deep cause to regret his indiscretion; make no mistake about that. Am I understood?"

It fell to Farmer Oddy, dimly grasping the speaker's meaning, to translate it into the vernacular.

"Squire do say," he informed the uneasy company, "as none o' ye is to go a-repeating this wicked tale, for 'tis not true, an' that ev'ry man alive of ye do very well know. And he says as ye may cut your sticks off of his land in double quick time if ye do, those of you as works for him—and t'others won't get no more of his custom, if they do go a-repeating of this wicked lie."

"Lard sakes, to think o' that, now!" murmured Thomas Sprake in dull amazement. "On our souls, sir, we meant no harm. 'Twas schoolmeäster——"

"I understand. I am not unreasonable enough to blame poor ignorant fellows like you. I will deal with young Chaldecott himself."

And this, in his own way, he proceeded to do.

To follow in the young man's tracks was not difficult, since he had again passed Demas in the road, this time not far from the inn and but a few minutes before he himself had entered it. A short ride, therefore, brought him within sight of the young fellow for the third time, though the moment of actual encounter did not occur until a short time later.

This was owing to the fact that Demas on his return journey had taken a different path from the cross-country cut which had brought him to the inn. At a certain point along the highway he struck into a narrow by-path which ran down to the river, which could here be crossed by means of a rope-ferry. The service being very much at the discretion of a deaf and irascible old man, Demas had rejected this mode of transit in his pursuit of Jeremiah, judging that in all probability the boat would be moored on the wrong side of the river for his purpose—awaiting the sexton's return. But now he sprang into the roomy flat-bottomed boat, dropped his burden, and proceeded to propel himself across to the opposite landing-stage by means of the taut length of rope which was extended on posts from one bank to the other.

When half-way across he heard himself hailed from the point which he had just left, and glancing over his shoulder found that the cry had not proceeded from Jeremiah Puddy, as he had at first supposed. A man, short but sturdy, a servant of some sort, was halloing to him vigorously as he ran down the slope to the river. Demas stayed his hand on the guiding-rope and waited.

"Bring her back!" shouted the man.

And Demas reversed the movement of his hands and sent the boat back to the starting-point. As its nose slanted in to the bank another figure came into sight, moving without haste towards the ferry. Demas again recognized the Squire of Kinson, and since they were apparently to be fellow-passengers he acknowledged with a slight bow the elder man's presence as he stepped aboard. The greeting was returned coldly and in silence. Demas faced about again and continued to act as ferryman until the opposite side was reached. Save for these three the whole landscape was empty. The short day was drawing to a close.

Having guided the boat in, Demas held on to the rope while Loveridge and his man stepped out. Then, turning to pick up his own coil, he found that it had been taken possession of by the servant. He made the boat fast, and held out his hand for his property. All this time not a word had been spoken. But now the squire broke the silence.

"Do not incommode yourself," said he. "I am walking your way. Gregory, behind—out of earshot, please!"

With a feeling of slight surprise Demas fell into step at the elder man's side. The servant, whom he had recognized as the squire's groom and outrider, dropped behind.

"I wish for a few words with you, young man," said Loveridge in his thin precise tones.

"I am at your service," replied Demas with no show of deference. His lack of recognition by this, the only man of family in the district, still rankled.

"I have been informed," Loveridge went on, moving with slow steps along the meadow path, "that not half an hour ago you made a certain statement."

"Possibly I did. If you will tell me what you refer to, I shall be better able to answer you."

"I can hardly believe that you do not know already."

Demas, for the first time becoming aware of his companion's reason for seeking him, made no reply. A swift glance at that companion's immobile face told him nothing. He continued to walk along in silence.

"Well?" asked the squire, calm and unruffled beneath the discourtesy.

Demas grew obstinate. To a hot temper nothing is more irritating than cool self-control. And Timon Loveridge, even in anger, was cold-blooded as a reptile. His eyes, clever, calm, only rendered human by a suggestion of cruelty, regarded the other with a steely light.

"I prefer, sir, that you should speak out," said Demas. "If I choose, I will then do the same."

"Very good. Please inform me, then, whether you gave it out as a fact this afternoon at *The Horse and Jockey*—a place the reputation of which for mean and trivial gossip you must very well know—that my daughter intends to ride in a public race for the pleasure and possible profit of two of the most dissolute young men in town?"

"I did," said Demas, meeting the other eye to eye.

"May I ask your reason?"

"Because I had the information on the best authority."

"Indeed! My daughter's?"

"No."

The squire made a slight deprecatory gesture.

"To a reasonable being, surely she and she alone could have substantiated such a tale."

Demas bit his lip and kept silent.

"Come," Loveridge pursued; "I take you for a man of intelligence. If you were like one of those ignorant boors yonder, I might better understand your attitude; I might even, as a reasonable man myself, pardon it. But you have education, and as I said, intelligence. I hope I make my argument understood."

"Hardly," said Demas, frowning and flushing now.

"I regret it," remarked the other in his studied periods. "I hope to make myself intelligible before we part. Gregory!—a little nearer please."

Glancing casually backwards, Demas noticed that one end of the coil which the man was carrying had become loosened, so that a full yard of the rope was dragging on the ground. He directed the man's attention to the fact by a gesture, and turned back to Loveridge.

"Please tell me in plain words, sir, what you want to know," said he with a touch of temper.

"Very little else. Merely the name of your authority; the individual who started this unwholesome lie."

"That," said Demas at once, "I refuse to do."

"You refuse?"

"Certainly. If the story is a lie—which I think remains to be proved!—as a man of honour I cannot involve in your obvious displeasure others who may have been as innocent as myself in reporting it as a fact."

"Very good," said the squire quietly. "There then remains but one other question. Do you consider such a story—lie or otherwise—likely to enhance the credit of a young woman of birth and breeding?"

"No," said Demas, "I do not, most assuredly."

Loveridge bent his head, and went on in his unemotional tones—

"There, then, young man, we agree. It is a tale that should not have been repeated; yet you have repeated it, and done so on an unreasonable basis."

"Not unreasonable," maintained Demas, growing a little tired of this constant appeal to the other's high divinity.

"But I say that it was. My daughter alone could have informed you positively on the point—and you admit that she did not."

"Mr. Loveridge," said Demas, interrupting with still more impatience this time, "are you sure that your own position is sound? Apply your argument to yourself. Since you learned of this rumour for the first time only half an hour ago, you also cannot have appealed to Miss Loveridge. Presumably, you are as open to possible error as myself."

The squire's face and attitude suffered no change. By now they had left the pasture land, and had come out on to the terminus of the narrow road which led to the church of Parley. The sacred building and the adjacent parsonage were within a stone's throw.

Said the elder man:

"By no means. As the father of my daughter, I can answer for her probable line of conduct more accurately than a mere stranger like you. Do you not admit as much?"

Demas shrugged his shoulders, and stared, sullen-eyed, sullen-lipped, across the hedge. He made no reply. In effect, his companion's verbiage, which had none of the expected warmth of championship about it, was merely making him more tenacious of his own opinion. How could he be in error? Had not Parson Evurtius reported of the wager on his return from the Hunt supper-party? Had not Felix Peverell himself confirmed the story the next day? In error, was he? Impossible!

So his fine eyes became clouded with obstinacy, and he held his tongue from speech.

"I think," said Loveridge, "that your unjustifiable conduct has been amply and logically proved. Your attitude does not please me any better than your indiscretion. Yet you are young, and for that reason——"

"Oh, damn all reasoning!" cried Demas with heat.

"——for that reason, I have given you an opportunity of mitigating your offence. Which, very unwisely, you have refused to take."

"Sir!" cried Demas, swinging swiftly round upon him. "Sir, I do not admit that I have been guilty of an offence. I am not used to such accusations, I warn you! As to supplying you with the name of any person who informed me of what I still believe to be an absolute fact—I'll see you damned first! Have you anything more to say?"

"Very little," returned the squire, and spoke across Demas's shoulder to his man. "Gregory, nearer still, please!" Then to Demas—the two had come side by side to the churchyard gate by this, and Loveridge laid his hand on it as he spoke. "If you are a student of Nature, young man, and by Nature I mean something more than a mere sentimental appreciation of trees and flowers, you will have observed that any lapse from regularity is inevitably punished with rigour and judgment. There is no reason why the laws of human conduct should be administered differently. I therefore intend to bring the perception of your own lapse home to you by the most suitable means—

that of bodily pain. My man has already received orders to inflict upon you a severe flogging."

"By God," cried Demas, his eyes on fire, "he will do no such thing!"

"I think," returned the squire, "that he will."

There was such a depth of calm conviction in the cold tones, such a uniform expression of callous purpose about the steady eyes and thin lips, that even in the midst of his passion Demas tasted of doubt and apprehension. He faced the other on the churchyard path—for both had entered the precincts, he did not know how—hands clenched, his shapely figure thrown back, all his passionate soul in revolt against the threatened humiliation, and glaring furiously from his startled eyes. To so much visible emotion the squire opposed his immobility, his lack of sentiment, his own sincerity. For the moment, he was almost great—so quiet, so calm, so unflinching in his determination was he.

"This is an unspeakable insult!" Demas cried; "an outrage—an unwarrantable assumption of an authority you cannot rightfully claim! I insist on an apology! I——"

He saw the man Gregory slip past his master, the rope fairly uncoiled by now, and realizing how much of organized planning had led up to this outrageous moment he waxed incoherent in his anger, and ceasing to protest in words, turned to measure his strength against the sturdy limbs of the other.

That it would be a losing game, a mere weakening of his vitality for what was to follow, was borne in upon his chaotic senses in the first moment of contact. Taller than his assailant, of perfect physical health and temperate habits, he was yet no match for the iron thews and staying-power of the fellow whose arms clung round him like tentacles. Moreover, the man had been a local champion wrestler in his youth, and brought some skill to the attack. He struggled with method, and without passion. A few minutes brought Demas into a state of subjection, panting, aching and strained in every muscle. His antagonist scarcely seemed to have lost breath in the encounter.

The squire nodded quiet approval. Demas, already half-stripped in the struggle, glared at him gasping. Any chance of deliverance, now that he was fairly overpowered, was, he knew well enough, not to be looked for. Puddy was from home. Parson Willavize, out shooting wild duck, had probably wandered far afield, and in all likelihood would sup with some distant parishioner before returning to the parsonage. Other hope of rescue there was none.

"Oh, damn you, damn you—damn you!" he panted with blood-shot eyes.

The rest was easy of accomplishment. Demas, partially exhausted by his struggles and the vehemence of his passion, was dragged by the two men—for at this point the squire lent assistance—towards the bole of a yew tree which overshadowed this corner of the churchyard, and fastened firmly to it by means of the rope which he had brought away from the inn. His face was pressed so closely against the trunk that he could neither turn his head nor speak coherently. An angry hiss whistled from between his bleeding lips, then he was silent. The rope was new and stout, and cut into wrists and ankles like bands of fire. He cursed in his heart as he stood thus bound beneath the overhanging yew. In the gloom cast by its inky branches his back gleamed pearly-white in its nakedness, for no circumstance of humiliation was to be omitted from the squire's mode of exacting the penalty, and Demas was to pay in full.

Then the lash fell upon him; great burning stripes that seemed to cut his body in two. . . .

At the conclusion the squire was responsible for an act of callousness which might well have cost the young fellow his life.

When he was released Demas fell inertly into the groom's arms, and his face turned blankly up to the dusky sky. There had been blood upon it before, but now not only the roughness of the tree-trunk was accountable for the scarified lips, for the teeth were still pressing upon the lower one and sending the red trickle out from the wound they had made.

At a word from the master, the man assisted him to carry the limp form out of the churchyard and across the roadway to the meadow beyond. At the river's edge they halted, and flung the unconscious lad into the water as the readiest means of restoring him to animation, and then left him to sink or swim as he might. . . .

It was still more dusk when Demas Chaldecott crawled up the river's bank and called upon God and man to bear witness to his wrongs.

IX

THE OATH IN THE CHURCH

THE return to consciousness had brought with it only two sensations, those of an excruciating physical pain, and the maddened desire for vengeance.

Only the craving for revenge upon the one who had done this thing in the coolest of blood had kept alive sufficient vitality in the suffering Demas to enable him to fight for his life. But when once that struggle had availed and he lay exhausted on the bank there followed a period when even the fierce torrent of his rage was subdued by the acuteness of his pain. Inert he lay, a wild delirium of fury gradually sinking once more into unconsciousness. When he awoke for the second time remembrance stabbed as vitally as before.

By degrees he dragged himself higher up the bank. Beneath his burning pain he was shivering from head to foot, and his breath still fluttered feebly in his throat. Finding strength at last to raise himself upon an elbow, he listened and made shift to gaze around.

The dusk had deepened considerably by now, yet so long ago did it seem since he had borne the incredible outrage that he would have been less surprised had the settled obscurity of night itself descended in the interim. Sound other than the quiet purling of the river there was none, and he realized, as his ideas slowly adjusted themselves, that he could expect no help from man. Another, in such extremity, might have prayed aloud. Demas Chaldecott, this undisciplined, raw, untutored Demas, opened his lips, and cursed.

And not the man alone. In one of the hot paroxysms of rage which swept across his sense of bodily suffering from time to time, he spoke an imprecation, deep and bitter, against the woman, too.

God ! how he hated the pair of them ! The man with his cold incisive modes of speech; the girl with her reckless young disdain; the father with his calculating brutality, the daughter with her superb disregard of the conventionalities —oh, curse them, curse them, root and branch, for the work they had wrought between them this day ! Forgive it ?—never ! Not while his blood ran red; not while the memory of those moments could touch him with the finger of shame !

And now, crawling, writhing, cursing, and sickening, with long pauses and a stifled groan or two, he had come to the end of the meadow, and slowly rising to his feet began to stagger out on to the road. A few vigorous paces would have sufficed to carry him in at his own door, but to-night —and the darkness had covered the scene of his degradation before he neared it again—to-night the way was stretched to an illimitable length, a veritable via dolorosa, a pathway of humiliation.

Yet, when at length he came to the garden gate and it clicked under his hand, pride sprang up within him, and he sent a quick glance across to Jeremiah's cottage. With a sense of relief he saw that it was dark and obviously tenantless. That the parsonage presented the same dreary appearance moved him to small surprise. He walked feebly up the path, pushed open the door, and fell down inside.

He lay all that night upon the floor, and took no heed of the passing time. . . .

The outrage had come upon him in an hour when, little fitted as was his temperament at any moment to endure it, it must needs insult him with peculiar poignancy. Following upon a long period of personal seclusion and a steadily increasing discontent with every circumstance of the life set out for him to live, there had come the temporary anticipation of better things induced by the summons to Lord Maumbury's side.

This expectation had failed, and failed utterly, in that an attempt had been made to place further limitations upon his actions and desires. And close upon the natural disappointment there had been sprung upon him information little calculated to soothe an already inflamed spirit—a statement capable of rendering him ignominious in his own eyes and contemptible before his curious neighbours. Already hot with revolt, proud, passionate and inexperienced, the barbarous assault must inevitably goad him to a desperation little likely to spare either himself or others. It only remained to be proved what form such a consummation would take.

Such thoughts filled the mind of Parson Willavize as he sat watching Demas from the fireside on the following afternoon. The young man was in his care, and since the moment of his finding him earlier in the day unremitting and paternal had that care been. A feverish morning had been followed by hours of deep exhaustion, and it was during this lull in his activities that the parson permitted himself to think of other things than his patient's need.

What had happened had been revealed to him in his first horrified glance. There remained only two questions to ask —Who, and Why? Demas had answered both, tersely and unmistakably. The parson swore beneath his breath, consigned all obstreperous hussies to perdition, and set about his duties as physician of the body instead of the soul.

As a consequence, there was no service held in the church, after all, Jeremiah Puddy being stationed at the porch to proclaim to any chance comers that "There ben't to be no sarvice, for schoolmeäster be a-took bad of a fever and passon can't be worrited 'bout holy matters to-day."

A little moaning sob, drawn from the sleeper unaware, sent the parson's eyes from the glowing wood fire to the bed. He studied the unconscious face earnestly, his own grown more serious, more reflective, than its wont. His worldly-wise eyes lost their speculative humour, and for the time being had no room for anything but pity. After all, Demas had never been treated quite fairly by life, and disaster was probably lurking in the skirts of this episode. It was a sense of foreboding that drove the gay lights from the parson's eyes, and sent the easy curves of his mouth into firmer lines.

Presently the sleeper awoke, moved in the bed, winced, and turned a burning gaze towards his companion. It was as though the fire of the fever that had raced through his veins was now concentrated in his eyes. Before the look even the easy-going Evurtius Willavize shuddered. He stepped up to the bed, cordial in hand, sympathy in his manner.

"Well, Demas, how goes it, lad, now, eh?"

For answer came a question.

"Who knows?"

"God bless my soul, you don't suppose I've told anyone, do you? No one knows from my telling, and even that damned ruffian isn't likely to brag about it, I take it."

Demas's expression changed to a worse one. The half-pathetic questioning died out—rage took its place.

"Steady, steady!" warned the parson, laying a hand, which Demas soon tossed off, upon his forehead.

"Hear me speak!"

"Not now. Not yet. Keep quiet, I say."

"Was a fool ever so served before? Curse him!—curse him for ever, above ground and below, till even his hated name is forgotten and his place filled by strangers! Curse the devil's pride that inflates such souls—may it prove its own destruction! Oh, curse him and his for ever and ever! As for the shameless woman whose greed for notoriety has brought this upon me, may she learn humiliation and grief and fear—may every stripe which I have borne return a hundredfold upon her body and soul—and may I live to see it!"

The parson's hand suddenly descended upon the hot young mouth. But already the passion had defeated its desire for utterance, and Demas lay back white and supine.

"My God, it was horrible!" said the parson warmly.

He had heard worse things, far coarser, more violent even, but here was nothing uttered in drink or under the influence of high stakes and the lust of gain. Twenty-four hours had elapsed since the outrage—and Demas Chaldecott's passion of wrath burned redder than before.

Yet, whether because he fancied that here was only a half-hearted sympathizer, or because the shame of the thing had bitten too deeply into his sensitive soul to allow of much discussion, this proved to be his only outburst. During the days that followed he regained his bodily health in a brooding silent habit of mind that never for an instant misled his friend.

He himself had taken all possible precautions to hush the matter up. The story of the fever had been circulated with care. The severed bell-rope, left lying in the churchyard, had been discreetly fixed by himself at the first opportunity. The blood-stained linen of the sufferer he had secretly destroyed. Even Jeremiah was not allowed to attend upon his master until he was fairly about again.

In these days Parson Willavize developed a passable capacity for self-abnegation, remaining voluntarily in a locality which he abhorred, for conscience' sake. But though he waited, expecting Demas to make some sign, the young fellow's moody taciturnity held until his convalescence was well established. The parson could bear it no longer. Duties, more social than pastoral, called him back to a wider sphere of action. He spoke out.

"Demas," said he one evening as they sat over a chess-board by the fire, "you're planning villainy. Think of your sins instead."

"My sins?" repeated Demas with slight emphasis. "And why?"

"Because you might do worse. I wish I could believe that you haven't a more desperate thought in your mind at the present moment than how to checkmate my King."

"What makes you think that I have?"

The parson took snuff; he could perform the action delicately and without offence.

"What makes me think?" cried he. "What makes me think that a cat's after mischief when it crouches under a bush watching a bird?"

Demas smiled—a little sardonically.

"Your metaphor is a very bad one," said he, "if you mean to indicate Squire Loveridge by your pretty simile of innocent unconsciousness."

"True. I grant it. My mind stagnates in the God-forsaken wilds. But poor hyperbole may hide a great truth, my boy. And I say again—you're planning villainy."

Demas showed neither resentment nor embarrassment. He continued to play absently with the chessmen, while the fate of the rival monarchs hung in the balance.

Suddenly the parson leant forward, and touched the slim brown fingers with his own strong capable ones.

"Demas," said he, "when my lord told you that story about your father, do you think he had no other reason save to point out your—supposed obligations towards Julia?"

The young man's gaze was lifted quickly. A little colour spread itself over his pallor.

"What other reason?" he asked, startled out of his self-absorption.

"The desire to save your soul—as he himself would put it. Certainly, the desire to save your mind and body."

The flush deepened on the earnest young face, a look of self-consciousness momentarily clouded the eyes, which involuntarily dropped before the other's steady gaze. Then——

"Nonsense!" said he. "I'm not planning—murder; if that's what you mean."

"I'm mightily relieved to hear it," said the parson very drily.

"Seriously, sir, did you believe me capable of that?"

"Seriously, my boy, I did not. But there are lesser crimes which it would be as well not to attempt. Your father went to extremes; don't you go even near 'em."

"You advise me, sir, to sit down under this abominable outrage—to accept such an unjustifiable wrong, such a vile humiliation, such——?"

"Steady, lad, steady! We won't go all over that again. You've done your cussing like a good Christian and there's no need to repeat it. As to advising—well, my forebears didn't get their name for nothing, I take it, and I'm their dutiful descendant."

"Well, sir? I owe you too much not to listen at least."

"Of course you do. Just what I was going to say myself. Well; to my mind, it's possible that you have a legal remedy. I doubt if even a Socinian squire has the right to brutally maltreat a young fellow who meant no harm. Why the devil don't you see a lawyer?"

"And admit to another man, a stranger moreover, that I have been forcibly seized, tied to a tree, and lashed like a runaway convict?" Demas shuddered. His cheek was burning with shame, his eyes glowed. "What!" he cried; "carry the case into court, and make it the tattle of every ale-house in the county? Good God, no! And if I won, what then? The squire would be fined a few paltry guineas—less than a third of what that horse-racing jade will earn on the course! Do you think my blood's so thin that a revenge like that, which adds to my humiliation and leaves their pride untouched, will satisfy me? No; I want to see him, to see her, in the dust where I have lain ever since that day. And, by God, no other revenge is good enough for me!"

The parson sighed, and shook his head.

"Demas, Demas, what will my lord say?"

Demas threw back his head. Very handsome, in spite of the tokens of his recent illness, very young, very rebellious did he look in this his moment of declared revolt.

"My lord?" cried he. "I can accept nothing, I will accept nothing more from him! That's all over. I don't mean to stay here."

"Good God!" said the startled parson. "Why not, and where will you go?"

"That I don't know yet, sir. I haven't thought of it. As to my reason—you can guess it, I think."

The parson nodded. Then just as emphatically shook his head.

"No one knows, lad," he said.

Demas appeared unconvinced.

"You know what a hot-bed of petty gossip *The Horse and Jockey* is, sir," he replied. "A tale told there to-day is in Poole by to-morrow, and in Dorchester the day after. . . . He may have spoken of it."

There was the possibility; Parson Willavize could not deny it. He had not left the house to gauge public knowledge, or even public opinion, abroad.

"You'll not tell Lord Maumbury?" urged Demas, after a pause.

The parson smoked in silence awhile. Then he said:

"I'll not promise, my boy. I should be sorry to break my word—to you."

Demas fell into moody silence. Past experience had taught him that this good-natured easy-going man had a tough will of his own tucked away behind his careless demeanour. Then, after a mere eye-signal, they took to their game again, and wrought out the destinies of the Red and the White King with their minds set steadily on other and larger destinies nearer the heart of each.

But late that night the parson tapped at his young friend's door, and entering, said :

" I wish you would give up your scheme of revenge, whatever it is. If I swear to keep my mouth shut to my lord, will that influence you ? "

" I'm afraid not," said Demas. " I have been thinking. Lord Maumbury is certain to hear of it. Those Peverells—the girl will be sure to tell them."

Parson Willavize frowned, and pursed his full lips at the flame of the candle which he was holding. In his night attire he was not an impressive figure, yet his next words were not without a certain dignity.

" Can you pray with such thoughts in your mind ? " he asked.

" I have not prayed," answered Demas from his pillow.

The parson looked at him for a moment, then in silence went away.

On the morrow he departed, a little doubtfully, yet feeling that there was nothing more to say. He had urged and warned. Stern chiding had never come into his spiritual economy. Yet, as far as his nature would allow, he had a sense of impending disaster.

" Good-bye, lad; God bless you ! Take care of yourself, and don't act as a fool."

They gripped hands heartily.

" Good-bye, sir. And, once again, thank you for all you have done—thank you a thousand times ! "

It was the first time that Demas had breathed in the open air since his illness, and he was looking round. The parson set one foot in the stirrup, then dropped it and came back to his side.

" Demas, I think you're fond of me ? "

" Indeed I am, sir."

" Well, remember what I've said; that's all."

In another minute the parson was clattering away on his sturdy little cob. A near bend in the narrow road took him out of the young man's sight.

Demas turned, and, as if the motion demanded some effort of volition, directed his gaze to the opposite point of view where lay the churchyard. After so gazing for awhile he returned to the house, took a large key from a nail, and came outside again. Slowly he stepped into the roadway, and entering the churchyard made his way with an averted head past the tree of his dishonour to the church porch.

Silent, forbidding, even untoward did the building appear in its solitary waste of untidy graveyard. An air of gloom surrounded it from end to end. Built of rough hewn stone, and roofed with slabs of the same, with eaves and guttering formed of decaying baulks of wood, its only structural elaboration consisted of a small pointed wooden belfry and a tiny porch, rapidly falling from the perpendicular and sheltering the melancholy growth of a large and misshapen bush of box.

The graves—sunken mounds many of them, for the beginning of the use of the place for such was itself sunken in antiquity—crept up to the church wall with no line of demarcation for a chance wanderer around the building. The tombstones stood awry. The very air hung dull and heavy, and the birds that came into the dreary acreage went slowly and songlessly among the overhanging trees. The path that led from the gate to the porch was scarcely discernible among the rank herbage, and gave to an imaginative mind the impression of having been constructed for one use alone, that of the final procession that lends dignity to the commonplace and pathos to obscurity.

Demas unlocked the door. It swung back heavily on rusty hinges, and the damp close atmosphere of a building long disused and falling into slow decay, struck upon his weakened senses.

Inside, the church was of almost incredible gloom, so that eyes fresh from the outer world could see nothing but immensity where, in truth, there was but a limited space rendered more circumscribed by heavy beams and rafters of time-blackened oak, high-doored pews and a small obscure chancel. On the day when Demas Chaldecott entered the building, the sole object untouched by hoary tradition was the one which had recently absorbed a history to itself—the newly-affixed bell-rope, which, catching a modicum of light from the open door, hung like a pale ray from the vault of darkness above to within a few feet of the stone floor, dangling a hand's turn from the choir's pew.

Demas saw it, and drew fresh strength for his purpose from the sight. Treading more firmly now, he went up the tiny nave, passed through the chancel rails, and paused before the Table of Remembrance. Here he knelt down; but not to pray.

"Before Heaven, before all Uncreated Things, I swear: That the memory of my wrongs shall remain with me until my life's end; that my hand shall be against the man who has done this, and upon his family until they are even as I am; that they shall know humiliation, distress and pain, if by any means my hand and brain can lay these upon them;

that I will know no peace until this thing is done or my life is consumed away; that I will spare neither the woman nor the man when chance or scheming brings either within my power. And my revenge shall be without dishonour to myself. So help me God!" . . .

He raised his head, paused for a moment, then sank it into his hands.

"And if there be any sin in this, may the Lord be merciful."

Thus did he seek to maintain a continuity of his former habits and beliefs in a new scheme of moral action—not dishonestly, nor irreverently; yet his mind was set upon his own way with a steady fixity of purpose, none the less.

X

THE LADY OF THE SADDLE

ONCE again the scarlet habited form of Bathia Loveridge was flashing along between the thinned hedgerows in the vicinity of Parley.

The year was saddening to its fall, and the narrow by-roads were already strewn with a motley carpeting of brown and orange and yellow discs—the small coin which nature pays at the end of her gay season to the universal law of finality here on earth. The air was suffused rather than brightened by a colourless sun that served small purpose save that of drawing thin trails of vapour from fence and bough that lay within its touch. In this district was much water, and early though the season was, already the meadows were unsafe for cattle, and spread their bosoms naked to the steely mirror of the sky. In the moister localities tiny globules pearled every object which the eye might rest upon, and the roadway at the farthest point of vision gave back an unillumined shine, as cold and passive as a moonbeam.

It was not an inspiring day, yet the girl rode as one with a purpose. And this no less because every circumstance of her training, every impulse in her own breast, conduced to make her at this early stage of her history a mere reflex of the moods of the great mother. To this girl, more than to most, there was no border-line between material and immaterial. As an ailing body aches to a change in the wind, or enervates beneath a summer sun, so Bathia Loveridge swayed temperamentally to the aspects of nature—

becoming, in her most ethereal humours, a mere essence at one with the passionate protest of a winter night, or, with the tremulous aspiration of an April dawn.

Thus, in her rides abroad—and while on horseback she might have been said to be most truly alive—she galloped in the teeth of a gale, cantered through the dappled sunlight of the early year, and could scarcely discover enough energy to maintain an easy amble during the heavy mild days before the frost.

Wherein lay the exception on this particular morning. She was riding at full pace, with hardly a glance at misty meadow or sodden hedgerow. Turning off the main road she dashed across country into the windings of the track that led to the three adjacent buildings—Parley Church, Jeremiah Puddy's cottage, and the combined parsonage and schoolhouse. It was this last which had drawn her from unaccustomed ways.

She slipped to the ground, and looked round about. No one was in sight. She knew the place well enough, and Jeremiah, in his capacity of gardener at Kinson Place, had given grudging information from time to time concerning his young master at the schoolhouse. Being at this epoch a woman only in body, and still awaiting the development of a conscious femininity, Bathia Loveridge had not been allured into her present enterprise by any report which she had heard of the young man.

Her mind was of a masculine directness and grasp of motive. Recalling her wild and uncontrolled rush from the side of the prostrate Demas, she had come to adopt his presumable perspective, and desired to explain. It was a fact that the bay horse, momentarily mastered, had taken wicked revenge by bolting headlong and nearly breaking her neck; a circumstance which she had not been able to control until all thought of sympathetic inquiry was out of the question. This present visit to the scene of her escapade was intended to rectify the omission.

She hitched her bridle over the palings, and opened the gate. Her approach, made thus for the first time to the house of a young man living alone, exhibited none of the feminine timidity that might have been expected of the occasion. Had she reasoned about the matter—which, in truth, she did not do, since reasoning invariably implies doubt, and she had here none at all—she might have argued thus: Demas Chaldecott, the schoolmaster, lived here; she wished to speak to him; why should she not call?

The door of the house stood open. Bathia struck it with her riding-whip and waited. There was no response, nor, though she leaned towards the aperture, did she catch the murmurous hissing of uncouth young voices repeating words in unison. The house was utterly silent. Pushing the door farther back, she stepped inside, and sent her own voice—earnest, clear, yet vibrant—thrilling through the stillness.

"Mr. Chaldecott!"

Neither voice nor footfall answered her. Her forehead contracted in a frown, and disappointment rendered yet more wistful a mouth whose dominant expression was one of half-concealed tenderness. It was obvious that the house was empty.

Knowing nothing of the owner's recent incapacity for carrying on his daily duties, Bathia was perplexed. This was the schoolhouse as certainly as the young man whom she had knocked down must have been the schoolmaster. True, she had barely glanced at him, but as both his face and form were unknown to her, the inability to do so had not affected a possible recognition. The parson she knew by sight, and had identified by a chance glance.

Leaving the house, she returned to the roadway, which she crossed towards Jeremiah's cottage. But here also her attempts to attract notice had no effect, so, with flagging steps and spirits already sensitively moderating themselves to the low tones of the dull landscape, she sauntered out into the open again.

The church caught her eye. Curiosity moved her, though with scarcely enough vitality to carry her into the churchyard. She did so listlessly, strolled into the dark little porch, and finding the door standing half-way open looked inside.

A voice, low and passionless, broke the stillness. It drew her forward a yard or so. In the dim recesses of the chancel she could make out a figure, motionless and black.

It was a man on his knees. He was praying there alone.

At the conviction, there swept across her body a hot flush as of shame, and across her soul that sense of impropriety that had been lacking until now. Glowing like a red rose at the thought of her intrusion upon such privacy, she withdrew at once.

Very careful was she now that no heel should click on the flagged floor, nor the door move one inch out of its place as she held her heavy skirts tightly round her limbs and crept away. Her last apprehensive look assured her that her presence had not been noticed, for the man had not moved.

Yet he might leave the church at any moment. The thought hurried her down the path and back to her horse's head. In a moment she was in the saddle, ready to ride away. Her mood was shattered, the ordinary ways of life broken through, and her femininity had taken fright. There could be no apologetic interview between her and the schoolmaster this day.

The little incident, even interpreted as Bathia in her pathetic lack of knowledge interpreted it, would have been unimportant, almost trivial, to an ordinary woman. But this girl had been dedicated from her birth to the twin divinities of Nature and Reason, left in their charge, disciplined and educated by them, and by them alone, and left to creep shyly and furtively towards a knowledge and conviction of higher things. Which things, until the coming of her stepmother with her sour piety and prim platitudes, had been openly disallowed and reasoned out of existence.

To the warm-hearted emotional girl, bound to conceal her own spiritual development alike from the cold arguments of her father and from the narrow unsympathetic dogmas of his wife, it was natural that an added sanctity should envelop while it glorified all the aspirations and exercises of devotion whether in herself or others. Hence her heedless straying into the privacy of personal prayer became in her eyes more than an indiscretion, if less than an enormity. Its correct plane being balanced between the two, she regarded it as a misdemeanour not lightly to be overlooked by the worshipper nor condoned by herself. Flight was the only solution possible in such distressing circumstances, and as, when left to herself, impulse ruled her life, she had no sooner realized this than she was off and away, skimming along as lightly as a swallow and apparently with no more contact with the ground.

As usual on these wild gallopings of hers, she had now no direction nor purpose in her ride. The aim which had brought her to Parley schoolhouse having failed of fruition, desire had withered within her. After the first headlong rush had carried her well away from the scene of her indecorous blundering, she let the reins lie loosely upon her horse's neck, and gave way to the lassitude induced by the enervating character of the day.

Her eyes looked out across the pale greys and duns of the landscape with a wistful weariness, the red mouth grew mournful, the slender figure drooped. The exercise indeed was pleasant, less of a joy than she had known it, but still a comforting sensation, but at the end of it what was there save a return to the home which she was beginning to loathe and to hate?

An hour or more of this desultory riding brought her by devious ways within sight of *The Horse and Jockey Inn.* It was not much past noon. Her presence at the squire's table would not be demanded before two o'clock. There was no need to return to Kinson Place yet awhile. With a sudden resolve she put her mount to a canter—the first involuntary pace which he had needed to assume since her mood of dejection had left him to himself. A few brisk strides brought the pair of them to the inn-yard.

To enter such a place alone was an act of direct disobedience to the iron will which sought to rule all things in heaven and earth for her. But as the very ride itself, considering the purpose for which it had been undertaken, was an equally flagrant insubordination there need scarcely be any scruples on that score. Her horse was in need of water, and the creature was the only thing in the world that she loved.

She had imagined that the yard would be empty at this hour. To her surprise a knot of men stood in the middle of the paved space. To her further astonishment, leavened now with interest, these were gathered round a horse of such superb proportions and evident high breeding that she caught her breath in a gasp of admiration.

Never had she seen so splendid a creature. Her own animal combined mettle and endurance, elegance and vigour. But her eye saw in the other horse a rival which repeated all the points of her favourite in the superlative degree. With instinctive jealousy she urged her own steed towards the water-trough, yet kept her chin on her shoulder and her eyes at gaze on the creamy-white paragon of horseflesh which seemed to fill the middle of the yard. Womanlike, she admired against her will, and would not admit it even to herself.

"Some traveller's hack," she mentally declared it to be. Yet she knew that such could not be the case, and desire rose within her—not for possession, but for the opportunity to try the paces of so fine an animal.

In turning, she became for the first time aware that she herself was momentarily the focus of half-a-dozen pairs of rustic eyes. As her own fell from the horse to the men, she happened to look straight into the round rosy face of the little farmer, Josiah Oddy. He touched his forehead respectfully.

" Good day to ye, miss. Fair weather for the time o' year, miss."

Bathia smiled. Here, too, was an innovation. Never since the day when she had suffered a twenty-four hours' fast in a dark closet for a childish advance to a hedge-tinker had she exchanged any sort of civility with an inferior outside her father's grounds.

" Jus' heven a look at Lard Maumb'ry's new harse, miss," volunteered another with a sheepish grin, intended to draw from the fair rider another charming smile.

Bathia instinctively came a little nearer.

" Stan' back along ! " commanded the blacksmith, waving a grimy arm in the faces of his neighbours. " Let the lady hev a look at he."

" He's lovely ! " cried the girl, leaning out of her saddle to touch the creamy-white satin neck. "Lovely ! Exquisite ! And he comes from Lord Maumbury's stables, you say ? "

" Not yet, my lady. He be a-gooen there."

" Ah, he's just bought him, then. But surely not from anyone about here ? I should have heard of such a creature. Jeremiah would have been certain to tell me."

" No, miss, no." It was Oddy who spoke. " He weren't foaled hereabouts, that's certain. Up to the nor'ard o' the county, Shaftesb'ry way, I b'lieve."

" And is Lord Maumbury fond of horses ? " asked Bathia, her eyes still dwelling in fascination on this latest addition to his lordship's stables.

" Doän't sim' to be fond o' much save his own soul ! " said Thomas Sprake, who was a sturdy pillar of the Established Church.

" No," agreed Mat Viddler meditatively. " No. I'd not goo for to say as Lard Maumb'ry be fond o' harses; not so tar'ble fond o' 'em, I shouldn't say."

" Yet he buys this magnificent beauty ! " cried Bathia. There was no lack of animation about her now. For a moment life was full of interest.

" Love 'ee, no, miss ! A' reckon there ben't another harse like this here in arl the cwountry, an' Lard Maumb'ry don't buy he. He hev en given to en, from arl us do hear. Hey, naybo'rs, ben't that so ? "

" You'm right," said the hurdlemaker, one eye on the horse and one on Bathia, whose face was glowing with a great idea.

" Doesn't love horses, and has this beauty given to him ! " she cried. " I wonder—oh, would he sell this to me, do you think ? "

It was Farmer Oddy who answered. The rest seemed to be seeking a way out of an awkward situation.

" I'm afraid, miss, that his lordship couldn't sell 'ee this animal, however much he med be inclined. Don't you know for why, miss? 'Tis a gift from the Crown."

Bathia puckered her brows at this hard saying.

" Meanen his Majesty the King, miss."

" Oh! The King gives him this horse? Truly, I should have guessed. Only a king could own so rare an animal," said she. " Of course he couldn't part with it. 'Twould be wicked and ungrateful. The King must think a great deal of Lord Maumbury. I suppose they are great friends."

Again there was silence, and again Farmer Oddy explained.

" Why, you see, miss, from what we do hear o' the King an' his gallivantin's, tisn't so ter'ble likely, my lord being so strict. But 'tis a old right o' the fam'ly, going back to ancient days when a Sir Peverell—sirs they only was in they days, miss—did a gre't service to the king as was then by saving his royal life out in a gre't battle and losing a noble horse over it. And the king, you see, miss, being that grateful swore by Act o' Parlyment that every Peverell as ever was should have a horse from the royal stables for ever. The last one died to year, and the King's been looking about ever since to find one good enough for his lordship. The Royal Gift Horse they do call en, and a right royal gift he be."

The girl, to whom the facts contained in the rambling story were new, had listened with attention. Her imagination—that delicate growth which even her father's cold philosophy had been unable to kill—seized on the romantic aspect of the tradition, and linking the past with the present found a hitherto unsuspected interest in the life of her fellow creatures.

" But how does the King's gift come to be here? " she asked. " Lord Maumbury lives miles away, doesn't he? "

" Tes so, miss," answered up the hurdlemaker. " The harse were foaled up to Shaftesb'ry trew enough, an' 'ould hev been sent straight to Wyke Hall down to Weymouth, on'y for a matter o' a bit o' a ailment, which his lardship sent orders must be set to rights by Tom Mellish here, the cunningest man in harseflesh in arl Do'set."

" I know," said Bathia. " Hasn't Tom been laid up himself of late? "

" Jus' so, my lady. 'Twas why he couldn't get to Shaftesb'ry."

Bathia nodded.

" I see. When will the horse be taken away? " she asked, regret in her voice.

" Soon, a' reckon, now. Young Mr. Peverell hev sent to say he'll coome soon to fetch he."

" Soon! " Bathia sighed. The tiny spark of interest would be short-lived, then.

" Mr. Gervis has been over already," remarked Josiah Oddy.

" Has he? " Bathia was indifferent to the coming of Mr. Gervis, it seemed.

" T'other week. Reckon he do look 'pon the beäst as his arn a'most." Thus the landlord.

" Indeed? "

" His lardship be breäken up, pore wold gen'leman, I hears say, an' the harse goos wi' rest of the praperty to Mr. Gervis, there bein' no young Wycount Pallydore as by rights there should be—Lard Maumb'ry not bein' a marryen man."

Bathia seemed less interested in the branch and stock of the noble family than in the handsome creature which had come into its possession.

" They'll take great care of him on the road, I hope," said she.

The farmer laughed good-naturedly.

" You med be sure o' that, miss! Watched night an' day he'll be, for wi'out doubt there be many a smart lad as 'ud risk bein' sent overseas—not to put a finer point upon it afore your ladyship, miss—for the sake of en."

" Sent overseas? " questioned the girl, who knew by rote the laws of Ancient Greece and the jurisprudence of the Cæsars, but no statute of her own day and country save in the vaguest manner.

" Tis the punishment as they give a young chap at last 'Sizes, miss, for stealen a animal not half the vally of he," came the explanation to her bewilderment.

" Did they? I hope no one will try to steal Lord Maumbury's horse," said she. " I hope Mr. Peverell will be very careful."

" Ay; ye med trust en wi' a score o' such! "

Once again Bathia sighed. She reached out her hand, patted the animal in a caressing farewell, and moved away. How pleasant a time she had spent in the inn-yard, with its homely air of geniality and gossip, its flavour of business leisurely done, its link with the outside world of which she knew nothing, for it had touched her life not at all.

The momentary stimulus being removed, she fell back into her former lassitude directly she was out once more upon the open road. But with a difference. Very far down something was stirring perceptibly. Had she but known it, acquiescence was being slowly gripped by the spirit of reckless rebellion. Such a state of things had been gradually forming long before this day which registered her first overt acts of defiance. But old habits again and again had crushed the nascent spirit back. Old habits, and a fear, a deadening unreasoning fear. For it was a fact that this girl who was afraid of nothing that ran on four legs, whose superb horsemanship had arrested the attention of so excellent a judge as Gervis Peverell himself, lived in dread of the man who was her father. Long ago his cold eyes had frozen to a premature death her shy tentative filial flutterings towards him. Her mother she had never known, and as her ardent nature expanded, in spite of the moral codes and philosophical precepts to which a weaker soul would have succumbed, she looked for some near object to receive her love. It made the pathos of her life that as yet she had found none. Untaught, although severely trained, it was small wonder that her intellect, left to its own natural development, had amassed a heterogeneous store of information derived solely from the books in her father's library; that her morality knew no shades of casuistry; that, in fine, Bathia Loveridge, at the age of two-and-twenty, combined the newly-aroused emotions of a woman with the habits of a recluse and the simplicity and inexperience of a child.

This fair anomaly of maidenhood rode home slowly and thoughtfully, wondering with a pathetic insistence why so much that promised interest and delight had been shut out of her life. She seldom saw a fresh face, while to make the acquaintance of a stranger was a thing unknown. Guests came rarely to Kinson Place; when they did, they were either cut-and-dried philosopher friends of her father, or precise sectarian relatives of her stepmother. By all such, the girl's budding beauty passed unnoticed, even as her imagination fell back cold and repressed from the uncongenial neighbourhood. Yet this very retirement had fostered in her frank clear nature the breadth of outlook and a simplicity of action which it might have been supposed to check. Reared in such an atmosphere of conventionality of one sort or another, once set outside it the world was so strange a place that she made her own laws immediately. Hence her frank approach to the Parley schoolhouse, and her equally characteristic flight from the church with her mission unfulfilled.

Having given her horse into the care of a groom, she entered the house and was passing through the hall up to her room when she met her father. Instinctively she paused, waiting for him to speak.

"Where have you been?" he asked.

"Out riding, sir," said she.

"I do not require to be told the obvious," was the cold rejoinder. "Your habit informs me of that fact. Moreover, I did not ask: What have you been doing? but: Where have you been?"

He waited for an answer.

"I rode to Parley, sir," Bathia told him faintly, and beneath his gaze her colour rose.

"To Parley?" He raised his level eyebrows. "And why to Parley, pray?"

The suggestion of lying was a thought unknown to this girl. The squire himself was a far greater respecter of the virtue of Truth than Parson Willavize.

"I wanted to see the schoolmaster," said Bathia.

"Indeed! And what was the reason for your desire to look at the schoolmaster of Parley?"

"I mean, I wanted to speak to him."

"Pray oblige me, Bathia, by saying what you mean the first time."

"Yes, sir."

"And did you have your wish?"

Bathia drooped spiritually beneath the cold catechism. Her hand clasped the balustrade at her side.

"Yes, sir; that is, no—I——"

Her father frowned.

"How can an answer to a plain question be at once Yes and No?" he asked.

Bathia, thus driven, plucked up spirit.

"Easily it can!" said she. "I saw him, yes; but I did not speak to him."

"That is well. Understand that I forbid you to do so at any time. What did you wish to say?"

"I thought I had hurt him once, when Sweetwilliam leapt down almost on top of him, and I wanted to say that I was sorry."

Squire Loveridge had not even the perverted sense of humour that is called irony, or he might have seen something to smile at in his daughter's innocent concern for the young man who had suffered worse things at his own hands.

As it was, he dismissed Demas Chaldecott from the conversation.

"It did not take you from eleven o'clock, when I saw you leave home, until now, to ride to Parley and back. Where else did you go?"

"Across country," Bathia told him wearily. "Then Sweetwilliam needed water, and I took him in to the inn-yard, and there I saw the loveliest horse——"

She stopped, shrinking a little beneath her father's eyes. His face was as calm as usual, his voice as passionless, but for the moment she loathed and dreaded him. When he had finished with her, a stronger, warmer emotion shook her soul—and she hated him.

"You have disobeyed me," he said, "in entering a public place alone. You will now go to your room and remain there until I send you permission to leave it. Your enthusiasm about horseflesh must be checked. It has brought you into disrepute already. Such a state of things does not please me, and I am resolved that it shall end. You will ride abroad no more. To-morrow I shall set about disposing of the saddle-horse which you call by so foolish a name."

Bathia flung out her hands in passionate protest. Her large eyes were glowing, her mouth was piteous.

"To sell Sweetwilliam?" she gasped. "Oh, no, no! You can't mean to be so cruel! He is all I have; my very own. My grandmother gave him to me. You can't sell him—he's mine!"

"You will find," said her father, "that I shall do as I wish in the matter."

In her distress she caught at his arm, and implored him anew. Tears were falling thickly now, but the man was unmoved.

"Your grief is unnatural," he affirmed. "Pray remove your hands. I have spoken. There is an end. Have I ever departed from my word?"

She dropped her hands, but continued to plead desperately, with soft gaspings and a heaving bosom.

"I love him so much, sir! I—I—oh, I promise never, never to speak with strangers again; never to go anywhere alone, if only——"

"Silence. Go to your room."

"Let me see him first! Say that I may bid him good-bye!"

"I have told you twice to go to your room. Am I to speak again?"

She gave a last sob, then gathered up the vermillion skirts in a listless hand, and crept up the stairway alone.

At the top her stepmother caught sight of her, and raised prudish hands.

"What have you been doing?" she clamoured fussily. "Your hair's half-down, and your face is as red as your—gown, or whatever you call the unladylike thing you're wearing."

"It doesn't matter, ma'am," answered the stricken girl. "I'm going to stay in my room; and—and I sha'n't be wearing the habit any more, I suppose."

And quickly passing by the scandalized lady, she ran into her room, locked the door, and flung herself in passionate weeping upon the bed.

XI

A REFUSAL

A VERY human disposition in mankind is to disregard the apposite in ordinary affairs, and to make boldly for the incongruous. Which same perversion is for the good of the world at large, since it feeds that sense of humour that is one of man's best endowments and lives in the main on the unwitting follies of his neighbours.

It was true that Squire Loveridge gave his neighbours very little at which to jest or even to smile. But his nearest approach to paying homage to the great gift lay in the fact that he, an avowed opponent of the Church and all for which it stood, had chosen to reside in a house of pronounced ecclesiastical design.

It stood off the main road at the head of a narrow grassy lane, and by reason of its isolated situation and somewhat singular architecture, it formed an easily distinguishable landmark. It was a long low building of a pleasing irregularity of outline, standing within a small domain which extended to some distance at the sides and rear. The main entrance was separated from the byway by no greater stretch of land than might have extended between a cottage door and the palings beyond. There was a barrenness about the setting which dated it, in spite of its quaint appearance, as of recent construction. The roof of the main building broke the skyline in three gables of equal size, holding in each angle formed by the conjoining bases, another gable on a smaller scale—the whole being surmounted by stacks of twisted chimneys arranged in the Elizabethan style.

Immediately below the rooftree the ecclesiastical quality struck the eye of the observer. Here were windows shaped like the lights of a church, long and narrow, diamond-paned and heavily mullioned, set in deep recesses. At a little jutting angle, which might almost have indicated a small transept, was placed the main door.

This in itself was a ponderous affair of oak, studded with squared-headed nails, and opened by a hanging ring. The bell-pull which dangled beside it led the mind to the notion of a belfry, and no stranger would have been surprised to find one rising from the tiles immediately over his head. But on looking upward he would have found only the customary crowning adornment of such a structure—a brightly-gilded weathervane.

Some such idle fancies as these amused the cynical mind of Gervis Peverell as he stood outside the house in the dusk of the dull November afternoon. His own manipulation of the bell-pull had sent a melancholy thin-toned whisper of sound through the silence, and it reached him feebly through the thick stone walls. It had, he observed, no note of welcome in it; imagination added, no encouragement for his errand. His somewhat thin lips—in feature he bore a slight resemblance to his uncle the earl—twitched ironically. But, as the delay was prolonged beyond the bounds of courtesy, the smile gave place to a frown, and he gave a more decisive summons to be attended to.

He was alone and on foot. His horse he had left at the inn, where he had arrived an hour or so ago. A hasty meal and a more deliberate toilet had equipped him for this visit, for Gervis Peverell never lost sight of the essential things, and on this occasion not only did he desire to create a favourable impression, but he also expected to be asked to dine.

The house was strange to him. The locality itself was almost unknown. This was but his second visit to the district. On each occasion the journey had had a characteristic object. The first time he had been drawn hither by the presence of a horse; to-day, by that of a woman.

At his second violent application the door was opened with a noiseless decorum that in itself seemed to reprove his impatient clamour. A grave-faced domestic received him without moving a muscle. He inquired for Mr. Timon Loveridge.

"My master is engaged, sir," he was told.

"Well?"

"He is never disturbed, sir, when he is engaged."

"Please make an application on my behalf."

"Impossible, sir."

"The devil!" cried Peverell. He rattled the door-post with a light cane which he carried. He considered for a moment, then appeared to make concessions to the squire's peculiarity. He shrugged his shoulders, and said:

"Please carry a message, then, to Miss Loveridge. Tell her——"

But the man was already shaking his head.

"Impossible, sir," he said again.

"Damn it all!" cried Peverell with extreme irritation. "Why not?"

"Miss Loveridge is keeping her room to-day, sir."

"The deuce! Well, I have come some distance, and I must see someone. I shall stand on the doorstep until I do. So you can carry that message, since you'll take no other, to anyone whom it may concern."

For the first time a look of discomfiture spread across the servant's face. Visitors were rare at the Place; seldom as youthful as this one; never so prepossessing or so authoritative.

"You do not come by appointment, do you, sir?" he asked.

"I do not."

"The master only sees such as a rule, but if you'll give me your name, sir, I might see what I can do."

Gervis Peverell brightened, passed his name in, and waited with confidence until the man returned. The door was then spread wide for his entry, and he took advantage of it before the other could speak.

"My master will see you, sir, presently, if you care to wait."

It was not the open-armed reception which Peverell had anticipated. He thought with some exasperation of his slender meal, foreseeing no supplement under this roof, and a wait of possible duration into the bargain. But since his own interest demanded acquiescence he followed the servant into an unwarmed room, formally furnished and dismal in the fading light.

Twenty minutes went by. Gervis Peverell fumed in silence. Unaccustomed to such treatment, the thought of the necessitous nature of his errand mortified him in its endurance. The house remained of a deathly stillness. He might have been in an untenanted building. Not a board creaked, not a murmur reached him. He swore aloud, and with some vague sense of self-preservation walked noisily about the room.

His circumscribed wanderings brought him to the window. It looked out upon a bare stretch of meadow-land which extended beyond the narrow strip of cultivated garden. The prospect was not encouraging, and Gervis Peverell was turning away when a small object flew suddenly earthwards across his vision. As he was in the act of bending forward idly to see what it was, the shambling figure of a man made its appearance and stopped short immediately outside the window. With face upturned and mouth agape he continued to stare into the sky for the space of half a minute. Then he lowered his gaze, stooped with extreme deliberation, and picked up the object which had fallen from the skies.

Peverell watched. His empty hour welcomed any chance interest, however trivial. In fact, he was beginning to think that, in the heavy atmosphere of this God-forsaken mansion, no incident could be regarded as trivial. While the man—it was Jeremiah Puddy—continued to hold the little white object Peverell saw his goggling eyes suddenly grow appreciatively more intelligent, and his open mouth change its form and narrow into a grin. He advanced and laid the object down upon the wide stone sill, totally oblivious of the strange presence on the other side of the casement. Peverell now saw that the object was something wrapped in a scrap of muslin.

Then a one-sided conversation began; one-sided, as far as the listener was concerned, for he heard only Jeremiah's share of it. The other person involved was apparently at the window of a room overhead.

" Oh, ay. He rang; fit to waken the dead," shouted Jeremiah upwards. " Eh? Wha-a-t? Oh! "

It seemed that some caution had been enjoined, for his next remark was reduced to a hoarse whisper, sent on its way through the medium of his hollowed palms.

" No; he ha'n't a-seen en yet. . . . Wh-a-a-t? Danged if I can hear ye, missy. . . . No; there ben't a soul about. . . . He be in's stoody, a' reckon. Leastways, he were when I did clippy roun' the winder jus' now. . . . Wh-a-a-t? Oh, ay, Meäster Peverell, they do say. . . . No, missy. I don't know nothen about that. . . . Careful! Why, there ben't a carefuller chap a-gooen 'an Jeremiah Puddy, an' that I will say, come woone, come arl."

The conversation closed abruptly, just as Jeremiah's observations, which had increased in volume by gentle degrees, bade fair to publish the fact of the clandestine intercourse to anyone within half an acre. He took a firmer grip upon the pair of shears which he had been clutching all this time, and meandered off, in apparent forgetfulness of the piece of property which he had laid upon the ledge.

Simultaneously with his first retrograde movement came the sound of a door opening somewhere overhead, and, in the infinitesimal pause between that and the measured footfall on the stairs, Peverell caught the faint jar of a window immediately above his own being drawn cautiously into its place. Discretion, he observed cynically to himself, seemed to be the characteristic of this house, and in some defiance of it he opened the casement by which he was still standing and drew in the small article which had been used to attract Jeremiah's wandering attention.

Impossible, so he argued after a moment's handling, to doubt to whom the thing belonged. The outer covering was obviously a lady's handkerchief. It loosened in his grasp, and displayed a little silver box which openly declared itself to have come from a feminine toilet-table, so polished, so dainty a thing was it. As if to establish an incontrovertible ownership, he found inscribed upon it a motto and a cypher, an intertwined *BL* beneath the words *Tandem Amor*, by which was indicated, he knew, the family of Loveridge.

Gervis Peverell had the unfailing instincts of a lady's-man. He had only a mercenary interest in the owner of this pretty thing, but he slipped it into his pocket nevertheless, intending a personal restitution.

And as he did so, Bathia Loveridge's happiness might be supposed to lie trembling in the scales of futurity.

At the same moment the door of the room was opened, and Bathia's father appeared. Peverell immediately swung round, and omitted to close the window.

The two men bowed ceremoniously across the intervening space. The squire was the first to speak.

"This honour is unexpected, sir. Mr. Peverell, I believe."

The visitor bowed again.

"The same. Do I address Mr. Timon Loveridge?"

"You do. Pray be seated, sir."

Peverell indifferently chose a chair near to where he was standing. This brought the other man towards that end of the room, with the result that the ensuing conversation took place by the partially opened window. Both men had clear incisive voices calculated to penetrate to some distance in the stillness which lay like an envelope around the Place.

"You have business with me, I presume, sir," suggested Loveridge as he seated himself.

Peverell bent his head.

"Of a sort," he assented. "Indeed, I might call it important business."

"Pray proceed."

"Even—delicate business," continued the younger man, watching his companion narrowly.

"Indeed, sir? I am waiting to hear it."

"It might be fairer, Mr. Loveridge, since it concerns not you so much as your daughter, to ask the lady to be so obliging as to favour us with her charming company."

There was a momentary pause before the squire made answer, and in that pause Peverell could have sworn that the window of the room overhead was opened again.

"Do you know my daughter, sir?" asked the squire.

"Not personally. By reputation—very well indeed. You have a daughter to be proud of, Mr. Loveridge."

"I am honoured—my daughter is honoured—by your appreciation," said the other coldly. "Your reputation, Mr. Peverell, also carries far."

Gervis Peverell glanced sharply at the speaker. The tones were even, marked by a cool civility, and the face showed no emotion at all. Yet there was left an impression of distinct hostility.

"I may add," said Peverell, somewhat at a loss, "that I have had the pleasure of meeting Miss Loveridge, once."

"I am interested to hear it, sir."

Peverell bit the inside of his lip. The man would give him no opening at all.

"The occasion was interesting," he resumed. "It was at a hunt. We had been out all day, and the fox had given us a pretty run for our money, and towards evening——"

"I think you must be mistaken," interrupted the squire impassively. "My daughter does not hunt."

"I am aware of that," replied the visitor a little caustically. "Miss Loveridge seemed determined that no one else should either. But that's not to the point, and I am taking up your time, sir. On that occasion, when the young lady really displayed a remarkable courage and nerve, I was struck, I may even say impressed, by her extraordinary horsemanship. It was—heavenly! You must be aware of her quality yourself."

"It is, I fear," said Bathia's father, "a talent which I do not understand. Still less, admire."

"You amaze me, sir!"

"I am at a loss to comprehend your own enthusiasm. As well rhapsodize over the efficiency of a groom or stable-boy as to compliment a woman on a physical accomplishment which she possesses in common with these."

Beneath the cold clear scrutiny Gervis Peverell flushed a little. Yet he made shift to bear the implied contempt, since he had not yet come to his point.

"I never yet saw a groom who could ride like that," he remarked.

The squire made no reply. Peverell shifted his feet a little. Then he smiled, and added:

"If I had, I'd have made his fortune—and my own, long ago."

"Some men's fortunes," returned the squire, "are easily made."

Gervis Peverell shrugged his shoulders.

"I'm sure to God I hope so," said he. Then he leant swiftly forward. "Sir," he ran on, "will you allow me to speak a few words with your daughter? I have, in fact, a favour to ask."

"You surprise me, sir. As my daughter is not able to see you to-day—as, to be candid, Mr. Peverell, I shall take care that she does not see you at any time—you must allow me to judge of the reasonableness of your request."

Again Gervis Peverell bit his lip; more openly this time. His temper was becoming a little ragged. Yet he controlled it admirably.

"Perhaps," he said, "you may not be displeased when I tell you that I have staked my confidence in Miss Loveridge's prowess in the saddle to the tune of several thousand pounds."

"You mean, I suppose, that, following the custom of the world to which you belong, you have betted on her skill to such an amount?"

"Precisely, sir. There, you will agree, I show myself a man of taste and judgment, and not a mere idle flatterer. Miss Loveridge is pitted against some of the foremost riders of the day—names which may even have reached these solitudes. The course has been planned out and the day fixed. Oh, I assure you, Mr. Loveridge, the affair is the talk of the town. The Great Race, the bucks call it. Even his Majesty is interested, and Miss Bathia is toasted at White's every night——"

"Stop!"

The squire had risen and now faced his visitor, his pale face a little paler, and his cold grey eyes a little harder. But his manner was quite calm. Very quietly he continued :

" May I ask if my daughter is aware of all this ? "

" I can hardly say. Probably not, unless—— "

" May I ask if all these arrangements have been made without her consent ? "

" It is her consent that I have come to ask for now," said Peverell; " I thought you understood that."

" There are," replied Loveridge evenly, " one or two things which you apparently do not understand, sir."

A sense of chill, not wholly attributable to the unwarmed atmosphere or to the open window, crept up Peverell's spine. He looked the other squarely in the face. There was some courage in the act.

" What is it that I do not understand ? " he asked, forcing a smile.

" First," Loveridge told him, " that I have already had a man flogged for presuming to repeat this story."

" Unlucky devil ! " said Peverell without feeling.

" Secondly, that my daughter will ride in no public race for the betterment of you and your fellows."

Gervis Peverell turned white. For an instant his lips parted in an ugly way, showing his firmly-set teeth. Then he pulled himself together. He, too, was on his feet by now, only a few inches separating him from his companion.

" You are not a man of the world, Mr. Loveridge," he cried, " and consequently cannot be expected to grasp the situation fully. But I tell you that what you suggest is impossible. Impossible, sir, I say ! Miss Loveridge must ride ! There's no help for it. She must, by God, or—— "

" Yes, Mr. Peverell ? "

The younger man banged his fist down upon the window-sill.

" Or I shall forfeit close on a quarter of a million ! Think of that, sir ! Good God, it would ruin me ! "

" I have thought of it," said the squire.

Peverell stared into the expressionless face, noted the determined set of the strong lips, and passed from a chilly sweat to the full flush of passion.

" But—damn it all !——" he cried; " am I to be ruined because of your absurd scruples ? The girl won't show herself such a thin-blooded prude, I'll swear—— "

" Pray do not mention my daughter again. I have given you your answer, sir. I must request you not to make an unmannerly scene."

"Unmannerly!" The man of fashion caught up the word quickly, then seemed to understand that an open quarrel was the one thing which he could not afford—as yet. He held himself in, and forced a thin smile.

"I have not the slightest desire to disturb the peace of your house, I assure you, Mr. Loveridge," said he. "But I can hardly be blamed for wishing to make you see the affair from my point of view. While making every excuse for your natural want of sympathy with the pleasures of the world, I must insist that you are acting with unnecessary harshness. An attitude which, as I have pointed out, threatens to bear very hardly upon me."

"I can only say, Mr. Peverell," replied the squire, "that you would have shown more reason had you thought of all this before acting so rashly. As you have failed to do so, I fear that you must bear the penalty. The lesson, no doubt, will be a wholesome one."

Peverell drew a long breath.

"My God!" he said. Before the thought of his liabilities he flinched like a thing of straw. He brushed his handkerchief across his lips, and his fingers were shaking a little. Loveridge was already moving towards the door.

"One moment, sir!" cried Peverell, without following.

"I think, sir, that there is nothing more to be said."

"But I venture to suggest that you do not yet understand what your refusal means to me!" cried the man who had never pleaded with one of his own sex before. "If I fail to produce my rider on the stated day, I shall not only be disappointed of the hopes which she could so easily realize, but I become involved to the extent of many thousands of pounds. A sum, in fact, which I can at this present moment, ill afford. Sir, I tell you, your peremptory refusal will beggar me!"

"And I repeat, sir, that you should have considered all this before."

The squire was at the door by now, his finger on the handle. Peverell followed him, desperation in his eyes. Even his modish dress and elegant figure could not make him look other than a broken man.

"If I could see Miss Loveridge——" he began.

"You will not see her. Come, sir, you waste my time with your childish repinings. The man whom I flogged yielded to the inevitable with less whimpering than you. Have you no more fortitude under worldly disappointment than this?"

Peverell flushed once again under the other's steady gaze. But he drew himself up stiffly.

"Please don't compare me to a dirty yokel," he said. "It will not improve my temper, sir. As a gentleman, I am bound, of course, to accept your decision."

The squire bowed.

"The first reasonable words which you have spoken," he said.

"But don't try me too far! We Peverells have the reputation—— "

"I am aware of the family reputation, sir; particularly of yours."

"You go a little beyond the point," said Peverell with a glint of white teeth behind his quivering lips.

"Scarcely so. I know you to be a man of pleasure, a gambler, a fighter, a hankerer after other men's wives—— "

The exaggeration of the statement was not to be contravened without an implied limitation equally distasteful. The accusation could therefore only be met by complete denial, or a sneer. Gervis Peverell chose the expedient that best fitted in with his mood.

"At least," he observed suavely, "I have never hankered after yours."

But this man before him had not sufficient blood in his body to flood his cheek even at that cheap insolence. He merely met the speaker's glance gravely, and proceeded to unbar the door.

"There might be salvation in that," he observed. "But you, I fear, will run after your own kind to the last. Good day, Mr. Peverell. It will be useless for you to trouble to visit this house again."

And Gervis Peverell found himself on the outside of the door in the gathering dusk, with ruin staring him in the face. At the gate he turned, swore savagely, and shook his fist at the lonely house.

XII

THE COMPACT

He set off down the grassy lane at a brisk pace. Nothing apparently was to be gained by lingering in the neighbourhood. The gloom and solitude of the place had deepened since his confidence had sent him along this road in the opposite direction. He continued to swear at intervals beneath his breath, cutting savagely at the hedgerows with his cane as he strode past. But he did not again turn his head. His outlook mainly concerned the future, and the house of the Loveridges typified what lay behind. He had been a damned fool!—a damned incredible fool! So much he admitted, but it was not his way to spend much time in regretting past follies. And it was the blank ruin of the future which concerned him now. Ruin; and the laughter of his sporting adversaries, and the recriminations of those who had trusted in his judgment—for others beside himself must fall through this disastrous failure of his. These things had to be faced. Yes, by God, they had——

"Mr. Peverell!"

A friendly bet here, arising out of the greater one; a debt or two there, long overdue. Heavens, how even his friends would turn and rend him for what he would not be able to give! There was more besides, a matter which he was keeping in the background of his mind through lack of courage to face it. Yet it hung like a shadow over all his thoughts and blackened them still more.

"Oh, Mr. Peverell!"

Who was calling him? He paid no heed, angry at the bare notion of recognition. Diana Woodland's fair face, regal and imperious beneath its coronet of dusky hair, rose up before him, with his unpaid-for diamonds around her throat. He could picture the mockery in her drooping eyes. Well, thank God, Felix would be ruined, too!

He ground his heel into the soft soil at the thought, and then became aware that he was standing stock-still between the dusky hedgerows, and that the patter of light feet, and the panting reiteration of his name, were close behind.

With the natural irritation of one disturbed in harassing thoughts, he turned abruptly, and came face to face with a girl. A pair of deep blue eyes gazed into his, but the parted lips could only quiver as she tried to regain her breath. He noticed, even in the fading light, the vivid intensity of the colour that was spread upon them.

"I am Bathia Loveridge," she gasped in her deep breathing, standing there like the vision of his own thoughts.

Peverell bowed. He had recognized her immediately. But he merely looked at her, a question in his eyes. For once his ready tongue was silent.

"You, I think—are Mr. Peverell."

Again he bowed.

"Let us walk to the end of the lane," said she with a quick glance backwards.

"With pleasure, madam."

She ran on almost ahead of him. A nervous apprehension was in every movement. He followed the swing of her white skirts with keen interest. This was the woman upon whom he had staked a fortune. Because of that, she moved him, but because of it also, her femininity left his emotions untouched. For the first time in his life an attractive woman made no appeal to his own vanity.

At the point where the lane turned into the highroad, Bathia stopped, and faced him once more.

"We must be quick," she said.

"At your service, madam," he replied.

She sent a flying glance up and down the road. No one was in sight.

"You came to see my father," she said.

"Yes," he answered crisply.

"About me."

"I cannot deny it."

"I—I heard."

He looked his surprise.

"I was in the room overhead," she explained. "Your window was open."

He nodded comprehendingly.

"Ah, yes. So was yours."

"I opened it. I knew you had come. I was afraid—I thought—I dreaded lest you had come to—to buy my saddle-horse."

"Indeed!"

"So I leant out over the sill and listened. I heard nearly every word."

Peverell's attention deepened. Had the vixen run after him to upbraid his careless use of her name? Her tones were smooth, her manner showed no anger. Yet a woman who should judge? He merely waited coolly for her to proceed. Her next words went straight to the point.

"You want me to ride for you?" she asked, and hurried on without waiting for his assent. "I came to say that I will do it, if——"

Peverell caught at her words in a haze of golden hope.

"Madam," he cried, "you will make me your debtor for ever!"

"Yes, but, if I do, you must take me away from here!"

He raised perplexed eyes to hers. Never had he seen such an intent look on any woman's face. He was puzzled, too, by her manner. She was nervous, but obviously purposeful.

" From here? " he repeated. " Take you from here? "

" Yes. I—I hate it so! I can't bear it any longer. If they take Sweetwilliam away I shall break my heart. He is all I care for—all that cares for me. Oh, you must take us both away from it all for ever! It's crushing me, killing me—I—I can't bear it another day! 'Tis all so cold, so dreary, so silent. Anything would be better. Take me away, Mr. Peverell, and I'll ride anywhere, on any mount, for you! "

Peverell, half-amused, half-annoyed, looked down at the hands which were clasping his arm. The girl's flushed face, with a wistful piteousness of expression, was close to his.

" But, good Lord! " he cried; " where am I to take you? "

" You must marry me," she said simply.

He stood aghast. A little oath broke from him. Then he laughed.

" My dear young lady," he protested, " you ask a great deal. Too much, in fact. You see, I don't know you."

" Nor do I know you. Why, then, should I ride for your pleasure? "

The logic of it was reminiscent of her father. Peverell drew his brows together in a frown.

" Oh, but 'tis absurd! " he cried. " Impossible! "

" You won't marry me, then? Not even to save your fortune? "

" I repeat—'tis impossible."

Bathia turned.

" Good evening, sir," she said over her shoulder.

Peverell strode after her, cursing her beneath his breath.

" Stop! " he called. " Miss Loveridge! One moment, please."

" There is no use in my waiting," answered the girl, serious-eyed and with her red mouth drooping. " There is no more to be said."

" Do you mean," demanded Peverell, " that you would ride if I consented to marry you, and that you won't, if I decline the honour."

" I mean that, Mr. Peverell."

Again he laughed; but in anger now, not in derision.

" On my soul," cried he, looking at this white slip of a girl who could, as he believed, either make or mar him, " you set a value on your talents! "

" I understood that they are of great value to you."

He bit his lip, and fell to striking the nettles at the side of the ditch with his cane. He could not gainsay her words.

Yet her request was impossible. At length he said slowly :

" I will take you away from here. Yes. You may rely upon me to do that. I give you my word—the honour of a Peverell, you know—— "

Bathia smiled.

" I know nothing of the honour of a Peverell," she said. " But, sir, I know just a little about the world. It is you who suggest the impossible now."

" Nonsense ! " he returned, irritation making him uncivil. " Besides, after you've won the race, you could no doubt marry whom you pleased. No one could talk then."

" Pardon me, sir. I wish to marry before I win the race. I will ride to save my—my husband from ruin, but for no one else."

Peverell grew more angry. The veneer of his polished manners fell from him. He spoke as he would have done before a groom.

" Oh, damn it all ! " he cried savagely, and swung his cane as if he would like to raise it to her shoulders. He was too angry to try cajolery, for there was a certain hard vigour beneath all his smoothness—due to the Peverell blood that filled his veins.

Again Bathia turned. It was not artifice, merely an acceptance of his refusal and a great dread of her absence being discovered, yet it served her purpose for the time as well as any diplomatist could desire. Peverell saw the chance slipping through his trembling fingers. For a moment longer he hesitated, swayed alternately by the desire for fortune and the hope of realized love. The one was represented by this white-gowned young hussy, worldly-wise and calculating enough beneath her mask of blue-eyed innocence; the other, by the dark-haired Diana, his queen, his goddess, coveted by his brother in similar love-lorn wise. The damnableness of it ! He set his teeth hard. Was he to leave her to Felix—whom he already suspected of being first favourite—by an act which would inevitably benefit his brother in only a lesser monetary degree than himself ? It was inconceivable—hateful—damnable ! And yet——

Then the great idea was born. The girl had bounced at him like a pretty shuttlecock. A flick of his finger, and she could be landed elsewhere. The humour of the notion —for it covered all his previous objections—appealed to his cynical taste, and gave a zest to its performance. He ran a few yards, and caught up the retreating girl.

" Miss Loveridge," said he glibly, " there is a trifling point which you overlooked in your—desire to serve me."

"Is there?" she added.

"Indeed there is. You see, I happen to be married already."

"Oh!" she whispered faintly, and her cheek became red. "I—I did not know that."

"Of course not. Very few people do, as yet. I rely on your discretion, Miss Loveridge. But you see that your proposal places me in a very awkward situation."

"And me still more so," said this pupil of Nature, who had learnt a few things.

"Of course. But there is a way out of the difficulty for both of us. That is, if you would be willing to accept a substitute. I have a brother—an exceedingly amiable young fellow, whom you'd probably love at first sight. While no one with eyes in his head could possibly look long at you, Miss Bathia, without learning to adore you."

She paid no heed to the fulsome compliment—hardly understood it, in fact. She was intent upon nothing but fleeing away from the hatefulness of the old life. She answered eagerly.

"But—but would your brother consent?"

"How could he do else?" In his airy relief Peverell put out a gloved finger and tilted her chin like a milkmaid's. "I'll go surety for him, on my soul, I will."

Bathia drew back, a slender white icicle.

"Is you brother like you?" she asked suddenly.

He saw his mistake, and made haste to rectify it.

"Not at all, Miss Loveridge," he said with deference. "He's a much more likeable fellow than I. A trifle more reserved, but you'll like him none the less for that."

Bathia stood in thought.

"He's the next heir after me," Gervis Peverell went on with careless allurement. "He may even become the earl in time."

"I wasn't thinking of that," said the girl simply.

"Shall I speak to Felix for you?" asked Peverell.

"Felix! Is that his name?"

"It is."

"Felix." She dwelt pleasurably upon the word. A little smile brightened her grave face. "I like that. It means *Happy*."

Gervis Peverell twisted wry lips at the hedgerow.

"I am very sure," he remarked, "that he will see it in that light."

Bathia Loveridge turned to him, still smiling. He noticed her good looks for the first time with an appreciative eye.

"If your brother is willing," she said, "I will ride in this race for you."

Gervis Peverell caught her hands—his own were uncovered now—and pressed them to his lips.

"You are an angel!" he cried.

"Let him meet me here this day and hour next week," she said. "My father will be from home. And now let me go. For I dare stay here no longer!"

She pulled her hands away, and the next moment was flitting like an eveningtide moth between the thinning hedgerows out of his sight.

Gervis Peverell dropped his fine manners, and laughed like an ordinary man as he turned away.

XIII

FELIX INFELIX

THE following evening he was back in Dorchester.

He himself had taken possession of a large furnished house on the outskirts of the town, but his brother Felix was content to occupy a few rooms over a shop—a fact sufficiently indicative of the low condition of his finances. True, the rooms were historically interesting and architecturally picturesque, being none other than those which, in Jacobean days lodged the famous judge of the Bloody Assize. But for the somewhat dashing young Felix Peverell, the model of many rising bucks in London town, and the envy of the younger sons in his native county, they were inadequate both as to style and accommodation. But although this fact must have been known to Lord Maumbury, that elderly relative did not open his own doors for the young man's reception.

A thin haze had risen from the river, and, hanging about all day, had thickened towards nightfall, and now lay in palpable drifts in the quiet corners of the town. Angles and buttresses of ancient churches were softened by the white blur, while the faint radiance from shop windows lost half its value in the thick air. The evening was mild for the season, and the hour still early enough for gossiping to take place at street corners instead of in the taprooms of the various inns. Being the end of a market day, the town was unusually full, and the waggons and carts from the outlying villages still cumbered both sides of the lower end of the long street. Wherever a larger conveyance, hauled up before the doorway of a tavern, proclaimed the dilatory departure of a tranter with his load of homeward bound villagers, a small crowd had collected to make interested witnesses of the start.

Gervis Peverell, for whom the incidents of rustic life had no meaning, pushed his way along, elbowed by homely farmers in leathern gaiters and greatcoats, who pushed back at him, unaware of his quality. A long horseman's cloak covered him from shoulder to heel, but beneath it was a toilette elegant enough for a supper table at St. James', for Felix, he had observed, was weak enough to be impressed by such things. Peverell had a desperate game afoot, and could not afford to throw away a single chance.

He was admitted at once to the house with the quaintly carved half-timbered front and overhanging upper story, where his brother had his rooms—taking by choice the front of the house for his living-apartments, since he could at least see some form of life from the windows.

He was sitting before them now with the shutters and curtains still drawn back, and the room unlit save for the glow of a wood fire. He had just dined, and having no appointment that promised any amusement was in the idle mood that welcomes any company that is not positively distasteful—even that of an elder brother. Having greeted the visitor with civility, he yawned and reached out for the bell-pull.

"I'm glad you came in," he remarked when he had given his order. "I was wanting some punch, and was just wondering whether the trouble of making it was worth the pleasure of swallowing it. No. That's not what I mean. T'other way round."

"Get a light," said Peverell, flinging off his cloak in the firelight. "What a lazy dog you are."

"Worse than yourself, eh?" laughed Felix good-humouredly. "By the Lord, Gervis, what a dandy you are to-night! I didn't trouble to dress—specially—being alone. Gad, I wish I'd got your man!"

"It doesn't entirely depend upon one's valet," said Peverell, drawing a chair opposite to his brother lounging at the table.

"Doesn't it? Oh, go in and win! I'm nowhere when you're about."

"You've been rather a long time coming to that conclusion, haven't you?" asked Peverell, regarding his brother across the candlelight.

Felix flushed. His manner changed slightly.

"Some women aren't caught by a fellow's fine clothes," he retorted, "but by the man inside 'em."

"I'm afraid I don't follow your argument, Felix. You always were a muddler when it came to headwork. You're reasoning on precisely my own lines, I fancy."

"Oh, damn it, I'm not arguing, and I'm not reasoning!" cried Felix. "Thank God, here's something else to talk about!"

A servant entered with a tray, the contents of which kept him occupied for the next few minutes. Gervis Peverell kept silence until his brother had ladled out a measure of the liquor and pushed it across to him.

"Where's your toast?" he asked with a touch of satirical pleasantry.

Felix's well-favoured face flushed again beneath the other's scrutiny.

"I thought you might have one," he said, raising his own glass and staring into it.

"Oh, no. I leave it to you."

"Damnation!" cried Felix. "To Diana, of course!"

He drank off the punch at one draught. Peverell sipped his slowly. Aware at length of something unusual in his manner, Felix frowned a little, and leant back in his chair, his hands in the pockets of his long tight pantaloons and his eyes on his brother.

"Well, what is it?" he asked.

"You've got to marry," said Peverell.

"I?" Felix came bolt upright with a jerk. "Marry? The devil! What for?"

"For the honour of the house, my boy. That's a sufficient reason, isn't it?"

Felix laughed, and let his heels slide under the table again.

"You know as well as I that the house was never saved by matrimony yet," said he. "It's the rock we Peverells have always split on; except the old man, who was wise enough not to try it."

"Nevertheless, you've got to marry," repeated the elder brother sharply.

"Not I—unless——" He paused, eyed his companion with meaning, and closed his lips. Peverell frowned.

"No nonsense, please," he ordered. "You forget yourself. I thought we agreed not to mention a certain possible contingency until it came off."

"'Tis your fault," complained Felix. "What the devil do you mean by harping on so about my getting married? Is it the latest craze of my lord, or only your own?"

"My lord has nothing to do with it."

Felix smote the table violently.

"Then it is you!" he cried. "Damme, but I thought as much! Trying to get me out of the way, eh? No, no! Put your money on the other side, my dear fellow! Pretty sort of a fool you must take me for to think I'll marry just to leave you free to have Di——"

"No names, please!"

"I'm hanged if I'll not speak as I please! Yes; that's it. And if you weren't my brother I should call it a low trick. As it is, I——"

He met the other's glance, and broke off at once.

"Well?" asked Peverell. There being no reply—"Call it whatever you please," he went on with the contempt of the man in the strong position for the one whom he intends to make his tool. "I don't care. Only—you've got to do it."

"You seem damned set upon it," said Felix. "What's your game? Why don't you marry yourself?"

"Plenty of time for that," answered his brother. "I'm not thirty yet."

"You're two years older than I am."

"I admire your memory, my dear Felix. But please don't plead your tender age as a reason for remaining a bachelor. You've served a good novitiate in one court at least."

"I've done nothing to be ashamed of," retorted the young fellow hotly.

"I didn't say that you had. Don't flare up so easily. Still, your unimpeachable integrity only makes you the more eligible as a suitor."

Felix helped himself to another glass of the punch and sipped it slowly this time. When the glass was empty he spoke.

"You've got a notion of some sort in your head, Gervis," he said. "You don't have fancies of this sort for nothing. What's it for? My good or yours?"

"Both," said his brother.

"How d'ye make that out?"

"It's on account of the wager—the Loveridge Bet," Peverell told him.

A little curiosity lifted the sulkiness from Felix's face.

"What's it got to do with that?" he demanded.

"Everything. The Loveridge refuses to ride unless one of us marries her."

"Damme!" cried Felix, and sat up staring.

"Don't gape in that inelegant fashion. 'Tis the sober truth that I'm telling you."

"So it may be, but it damned well knocks the wind out of a fellow. How do you know?"

"Because I've seen her."

"When?"

"Yesterday. She's a determined young baggage, and I fancy she means what she says. So you may as well get used to the notion at once. As the race is fixed for the fifteenth proximo, you've less than a month to get your courting done, to say nothing of your preparations for the double harness."

"Double harness be damned!" cried Felix. "I'm not going off courting an infidel young Amazon to please you! If you want a wedding, you can dance at your own—not mine!"

"There won't be much dancing for either of us, unless you're more sensible," Peverell remarked. "You seem to forget that."

Felix buried his hands in his pockets, and scowled at the punch bowl. It was true, and he recognized it, that he was as deeply involved as his brother in the prospective race, and, from a sentimental point of view, had as much to lose.

"You said she wouldn't ride unless one of us married her," he said suddenly. "Very well, then. Why don't you? The girl's more your property than mine. You dug her out. You bawled her name across the Hunt supper-table. Why don't you take the hussy?—and wring her neck for her damned impudence afterwards!"

"To be quite frank with you," returned the elder, "the lady did originally propose to me."

"Oh, she did, did she? Why the devil didn't you accept her?"

Peverell smiled. Felix was beginning to lose temper; his own was unruffled. That was one point to him. He replied to his brother's question airily.

"For the time being I am incapacitated, owing to a previous marriage."

"What a thumping lie!"

"One which has the advantage of being more easily accepted than discredited. 'Tis a simple thing to prove that a man is married; less so, to prove that he is not. My marriage was a secret one, so neither you nor anyone else could be expected to know anything about it. So the fact of your never having heard of it—which is the only argument you could put forward, if you tried to upset my statement, wouldn't count. But 'tis a point not worth discussing, since the Loveridge isn't at all particular, and seemed on the whole to prefer yourself."

"That's gammon," said Felix rudely. "She's never seen me."

"Took a fancy to your name directly I mentioned it——"

"You mentioned me? What a confounded liberty!"

"Said it meant *Happy*, and thought it quite devilish appropriate to the situation."

"Oh, damn the jade!" cried the prospective victim savagely.

"I felt like that," agreed his brother, "until I saw how the same situation could be saved by a little discretion on your part."

"Discretion! You mean sacrifice."

"Pooh! What do you lose?"

"My chance with Diana."

"Don't be a fool! What's your chance worth?"

"As much as yours—more, in fact."

The elder brother sneered slightly.

"Diana prefers me," Felix went on. "She's admitted it. How do you like that, my hearty?"

Peverell controlled his anger well, and even mustered up a counter-stroke.

"You can't make Diana the Countess of Maumbury," he said pointedly.

"Two doddering old fools have got to drop out of the ring before you can, either!" retorted Felix.

"No man would put his money on one or the other life," said Peverell coolly. "I can wait. And so can Diana. The only person who won't wait is the Loveridge. She's in a devil of a hurry."

"Well, I don't want her, and I won't have her! I'm not going to be saddled with a strapping Amazon for my wife. No, thank you, my dear fellow; much obliged, but pass me something else."

"Very well, then, I will. How d'ye like the thought of a nice comfortable little sponging-house in Soho? Or better still, the Fleet? My lord wouldn't lift a finger to get you out—he'd only pray for your conversion—and I doubt if even Diana's preference would carry her pretty feet so far for your sake."

Felix sprang up with an oath. Gervis had, he reflected bitterly, a most damnable way of hitting one squarely on the jaw, and without the gloves, too. He walked over to the fireplace, and stared moodily at the leaping flames. Behind his back, Peverell smiled faintly. In the long run, he had always been able to bend this brother of his to his will.

"But," said Felix presently, without turning round, "you're in the same boat, aren't you? Why are you wasting good time down here, unless it's because you daren't be seen in town for a while? Not for love of my lord! Oh, no!"

"That's true, Felix," the other admitted slowly. "Yes. We may as well get to the bottom of things. If this race doesn't come off, or if we have to scratch our 'man,' neither of us stand much chance of adorning the polished society we're accustomed to, for a precious long while to come."

"Just so!" cried Felix with his usual impetuosity. "Then why——"

He was looking at his brother now, and so saw him wave him into silence.

"But, at the same time, you must admit," Peverell went on, "that my position is a trifle firmer than yours."

"Hanged if I see that!"

"In this way, you fool! My lord may die at any moment. We heard of a serious attack only the other day. And his death instantly places me in possession of a rent-roll of a hundred thousand, while if it benefits you to the extent of a horse or so, or a small legacy, 'tis all you can hope for. You see the difference, don't you?"

"I suppose so," Felix grudgingly acknowledged, after a pause. He kicked his toe against the fender irresolutely. "But 'tis ungenerous of you, Gervis, to remind me of all this."

"I ask your pardon. I don't do it from any desire to wound you; only to point out that your obligations to Bathia Loveridge go deeper than mine."

"You've laid more money on her than I have."

"Granted. I don't pretend not to be interested. As a matter of fact, if the race isn't run, and my lord hangs on—which he may be so devilish inconsiderate as to do!—I shall be temporarily ruined. I couldn't meet my debts of honour alone, to say nothing of the others."

"Why don't you go to the Jews?" asked Felix disinterestedly. "Like I had to."

"Because," answered Peverell with an air of great frankness, "I've no wish to enter into my inheritance encumbered up to the neck; and because, my dear fellow, I prefer to come to you."

"I see. Fancy I'm well broken in, and not likely to jib, eh? Well, that's where you're mistaken. I don't want your precious Amazon. I want Diana."

Gervis Peverell's pale face flushed. He got up and stood by his brother's side.

"Felix," he said quietly, "I didn't want to have to threaten you. I'm aware that it's not gentlemanly. But you force me to it."

"Eh? What? Threaten? By the Lord, Gervis——"

"Yes. Not a nice word, of course. But useful, at times. Suppose my lord were to hear of your hanging round Squire Woodland's wife; writing her love-letters? Suppose my lord were to see one of them? What then, eh? He'd jump to the worst possible conclusion—those pious souls always do!—and you'd not get even the trumpery legacy you're waiting for."

"By God, Gervis—you'd not do that!"

"By God, Felix, I shall do even that, if necessary. And I'd like to ask you, where would your credit be the moment it was known that my lord had cast you off?"

Felix Peverell went rather white. His hands clenched and unclenched themselves nervously. Twice he began to speak and got no farther than his brother's name. Without doubt, Gervis had given him the knock-out blow. He cursed the chance which had given one of his ardent letters to Diana Woodland into his brother's keeping, and, still more bitterly, the acumen which had led Gervis to preserve it. The thing had come about simply enough. Felix had sent a letter to Diana by the hand of his confidential man, with instructions to bring it back if he could not deliver it to the lady herself. Diana being absent, the servant had negligently left it in charge of a particular friend of his who was in the squire's employ. Circumstances had delayed his mistress's return, and he had indiscreetly taken upon himself to restore the letter to the wrong Mr. Peverell, who had lately acquainted the real writer with the fact. Felix, thinking of the truth so bluntly conveyed to him now, quivered with nervous anger, and passed his handkerchief across his trembling lips. From his brother, he knew, he could expect no generosity; scarcely fair play.

"You're a devil, Gervis!" he broke out at length.

"Perhaps. It's better than being a fool," was the cool retort.

Felix tore the handkerchief with his hot fingers. He darted to the table, gulped down a quantity of the liquor, and faced his brother again.

"If I take the girl," he said, "you know what the town will say."

"What?"

"That I'm marrying one of your cast-off women."

"Pooh! That won't ruin either of us. We're popular enough to stand it, you and I. Besides, it wouldn't be true."

"Not for you; but who knows what the hussy is?"

"A very charming girl, I promise you. Innocent and lovely."

Felix swore.

"Why does she want to marry me?" he demanded. "You—the heir—I could understand. But a poor devil like me?"

"Simply because she's sick to death of her home. And between ourselves, my dear Felix, I don't wonder at it. I had half an hour's enjoyment of her papa's society, and upon my soul, if I were the girl, I'd bolt with the devil himself."

"And supposing he don't approve of me as a son-in-law?"

Peverell laughed.

"Of course he won't. That's where the romance comes in. It's got to be a runaway affair. You're to meet the Loveridge at the end of the lane to the Place at dusk next Tuesday to arrange the details with her. And, by the way, here's an opening for you. Give her this."

He handed over Bathia's silver box, wherein he had placed the handkerchief, explaining how it had come into his possession. Felix pocketed it gloomily enough.

"After all," he said, "how do infidels get married? I swear I don't know."

"In a church, like other folk. It wouldn't be legal else, would it? But you'll find the lady equal to all that. When will you go? Due to fetch the Gift Horse next week, aren't you? That'll fit in excellently well."

"And a nice shindy my lord'll make, when he hears I've married old Loveridge's daughter! He'll disinherit me out of hand."

"Perhaps; but we don't know that he hasn't done so already. Besides, the girl's promised to ride, once she's in the family. That makes you independent of my lord."

"Oh, damnation, I suppose so!" sighed Felix. "What a miserable coil it all is! I wish the old boy would kick the bucket to-night."

"He just the sort to go on living till he's eighty, to spite the unregenerate," retorted Peverell, picking up his things to go. "Shall I see you before you leave?"

"No," replied Felix rudely; "I've seen enough of you for some time to come. And I think I love you better in your absence. But don't make too sure. I've promised nothing. I'll go over and put the filly through her paces; that's all. If she's got thick ankles, I wouldn't touch her with a pair of candle-snuffers."

"H'm. Think over all my points, my dear fellow, and good luck to your wooing!"

"Oh, be off and be damned to you!" cried Felix, after his brother's retreating back. "I wish you were dead! I wish I was dead! Oh, my God, I wish we were all dead together!"

He buried his face in his hands, and dropped it on the table. For a long time he did not move. His heart was a miserable chaos of emotions. He was no great sinner; neither had he as yet suffered much. This thing was proportionately hard to bear.

"Oh, Diana, Diana!" he groaned.

XIV

A MEANS TO TWO ENDS

Demas Chaldecott had lost no time in sending in his resignation as the Parley schoolmaster. But pending its acceptance he continued to instruct, in a more or less desultory way, such urchins as presented themselves for his tuition. From these eminently stolid representatives of the rising generation he learnt nothing concerning the publicity of his own story. Jeremiah Puddy he forebore to question, and, in truth, avoided as much as possible. As a result, the sexton, hurt in his sensitive feelings, became still more independent, and never set his hand to a thing for the young man's benefit beyond what was the merest pretext for taking his wage.

To Demas, such conduct implied contempt; and contempt, a full knowledge of what had happened. Writhing under the conviction, he at length shut Puddy out of the parsonage altogether, declaring that he could manage very well for himself during the short time that he intended remaining there. In this way the days passed and he heard nothing of that small portion of the outside world which was represented by Kinson and Parley.

At the end of the week he began to suffer from the inconvenience of this new arrangement. Apart from the fact that the house was growing more untidy and uncomfortable than ever, his supplies were running short. The uncultivated garden affording nothing to augment his store, he was presently forced to set out to purchase the necessary commodities.

Even so, he went with extreme reluctance. The wounds in his body had healed, but his spirit remained as raw as ever. Left alone, he had given himself up to unmitigated brooding only partially interrupted by the duties of his calling. His passionate desire for retaliation burnt with an unabated fierceness, and the hours of his long night were devoted in great part to wild planning and futile schemes. Parson Willavize's counsel of moderation, though unforgotten, was set aside. Moreover, that easy-going cleric had, since his departure sent no word to encourage his young friend in the right path. Demas, therefore, at the present moment had no other guide but his own passions, and into a strange and thorny road these were to lead him.

He took the unfrequented short-cut across the Maumbury estates, swung down into the highway at a point which recalled his former meeting with Squire Loveridge, and therefore inflamed that heated blood of his anew; and finding the road clear set off with the haste natural to one who sees the opportunity of getting through a humiliating task unobserved.

Ready as he naturally was to anticipate slights before they were given, and to magnify indifference into incivility, he found nothing upon which to feed his sensitiveness now. The village tradespeople treated him no worse than before his hour of degradation, and seemed, as far as his acute perceptions went, never to have heard of it.

He had always kept aloof from his humbler neighbours, allowing no familiarities, indulging in no gossip, yet to-day the loneliness of his life since the parson's departure hung somewhat heavily upon him, and a friendly word or so would not have found him irresponsive. But none such was given, and having concluded his homely purchasing, he turned to go back to his solitary brooding for another night.

He left the little knot of cottages and shops behind, and walked along at no great pace, his gaze presently becoming fixed in an absent unheeding way upon a figure advancing in his direction. From a mere dark streak upon the haze of the distance it passed into human semblance, resolved itself from ambiguity of sex into the form male, and proceeded to take on an unfamiliarity which proclaimed it to be a stranger to the neighbourhood.

Having arrived, by these several processes, at this not uninteresting resolution before the gaze of the convergent Demas, it followed naturally that the resident continued to look at the newcomer as the distance between them narrowed to a few yards. Half-curious, half-regretful, he recognized the young man who had conversed with him three weeks ago at Maumbury Rings.

While he was debating whether, in the circumstances, an acknowledgement was desirable on either side, Felix Peverell sent a glance at him in passing, paused, made a half-turn, and cried out :

" Why, good Lord, 'tis the fellow with the eyes ! "

Demas halted, a sense of his disadvantages hot upon him. He was not now wearing his best suit of fine kerseymere, but the rough gogram which formed his everyday habit. Moreover, he was carrying in his bare hand an open basket filled with odd-shaped commodities. Yet a frank recognition of the other was now unavoidable. He therefore bared his head, and succeeded in giving a greeting as graceful as that of the young scion of nobility himself.

" Upon my soul, I'm glad to meet you ! " Felix Peverell exclaimed, offering his hand. Demas's long brown fingers slipped easily into their place, and he found in the clasp of the other an unexpected heartiness.

" The pleasure is mine," he returned, and there was a geniality about the manner of this new friend that made the compliment a sincere one.

" No; mine," reiterated Felix Peverell. " Dashed if it's not. Which way are you walking ? "

" I'm going this way."

" Ha ! I'll step along with you for a bit."

" By all means, Mr. Peverell, if it fits your humour."

" Whew ! I should think it did," said Felix as they started side by side. " Why, you're a perfect God-send to a poor devil like me who's condemned to spend an eternity in these wilds ! "

" An eternity ? "

" Comparatively so."

" Ah, you mean a short visit."

" Long, judging by the standard of dulness," replied Felix with a shrug.

" Business is usually dull," said Demas, speaking out of his narrow experience.

Felix darted a look at him.

" How the devil did you know that business brings me here ? " he asked.

" Well, I concluded it couldn't be pleasure."

" That's true," assented Felix, looking gloomy. " And a damned bad business it is, too. However—— ! Let's see, you live here, you say ? "

" For the present. I'm leaving shortly."

"Got tired of it?"

"I never liked it."

"How long have you been here?"

"Nine months; a trifle over."

"What a re-mark-able fellow!" cried Felix with a laugh. "To live here for nine months and not be ready for Bethlehem Hospital at the end of 'em!"

"We can't all do as we would please," said Demas, staring ahead.

Felix's levity vanished like a trail of mist, and he became exceeding sober.

"Gad, you're right again!" said he. "Here's another!"

Demas fixed him with a wondering look.

"You!" he exclaimed. "I should have thought that you, Lord Maumbury's nephew, had all you could wish for."

"Lord Maumbury's nephew! Pshaw!" cried Felix. "That counts for little. I daresay, now, you've had a deuced more out of my lord than I."

Demas flushed.

"I didn't mean to be uncivil," apologized the other, noticing it. "I've no doubt you've deserved it. But I mean that, generally speaking, my uncle has done very little for me."

"You must feel all the more independent."

"H'm! I don't know about that," said Felix, his thoughts glancing off to debts and duns.

They walked some yards in a friendly silence. The companionship was exceedingly grateful to the young schoolmaster after his week of loneliness, and he moderated his pace in order to prolong the pleasure. As to Felix Peverell, being in Rome he fell in with Roman ways. He would not have walked along St. James' in the company of a young man carrying a basket of groceries. But here he was in no danger of making his fellow equisites blush for his taste.

Presently Demas halted. They had reached the point when they must naturally part. Yet he hesitated. His home had little to offer. The disorder of it, for he had no skill in housekeeping, had increased since Puddy's dismissal, and he was just now realizing the fact. But before he had finally decided that an invitation was impossible, his companion suggested an alternative.

"Can you spare an hour to drink a bottle with me?" he asked. "I'm staying at the inn yonder. I'd be greatly obliged if you could."

"With pleasure," said Demas, a moment's reflection convincing him that there could be no more efficient way of encountering the tavern cronies than in the company of Lord Maumbury's young relative. And meet them sooner or later he must. If he had liked Felix Peverell less well than he did, he would have despised the thought of shielding himself from village gossip behind the social standing of such a companion. As it was, his sore and chafing spirit found some sort of sympathy in the other's friendliness, although he understood that this newcomer probably had heard nothing of his humiliating affairs.

At the inn Felix had engaged a private room, where a brisk fire was burning, with a table drawn close to it laid for a light meal. In a few moments the two young men had pulled off their outer coats, and were taking their places on either side of the hearth, chilled fingers outstretched to the blaze. Wine of an excellent French vintage, sandwiches and biscuits were brought in, and Felix proceeded to play the host in an agreeable way.

From generalities they once more quickly approached personal topics until, after Demas had, at the other's request, given a reserved account of his ordinary life, and Felix had grimaced at the monotony of it, a leading question was thrown out, which drew the conversation into still more intimate depths.

"By the way," said Felix, stretching out his feet to the fire and sipping his wine, "you're not married, I suppose?"

"No," said Demas.

"Nor going to be?"

"I am not," said Demas a trifle more emphatically than the ordinary negation demanded, for his mind had gone to Julia Trickett, the orphan charity girl.

"Lucky fellow!" cried Felix with a genuine bitterness in his tone.

"Why do you say that?" asked Demas with faint curiosity.

"Ah, that's my affair, but I do say it all the same."

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Peverell."

"I'm not offended," returned Felix. And fell to staring into the fire. But presently the desire for confidence outweighed the fact that his companion was practically a stranger. He leant across the table towards him, and spoke.

"You don't want to marry, and you're not obliged to. I don't want to marry either; but I've got to. There's the difference."

"Your uncle's desire, I suppose?" suggested Demas.

"My uncle? Damme, no! What put that notion into your head?"

"It seemed probable—that's all. But I've no wish to seem inquisitive. Forget what I asked."

"By the Lord, I wish I could!" returned Felix. "But the cursed thing's before me night and day. . . ." He got up and stood staring down into the fire, the light breaking into little points of radiance on the surface of his pale-coloured suit. "No. 'Tis not my lord. But that don't mend matters, my dear fellow—not by one ha'penny. It rather makes 'em worse; for the marriage I'm forced to contemplate isn't at all the one he chose. Very far from it, I promise you."

"Then why do you do it?"

Felix kicked the logs savagely, wishing in his heart that they were his brother's ribs.

"Because, I tell you, I'm forced to it," he said.

"That's bad," said Demas with a careless sympathy.

"Bad? By the Lord, it is bad! What I've told you would be damnable enough, but there's worse behind."

Demas, for want of an answer, sat silent. After a moment Felix surprised him by turning suddenly to ask:

"Do you know what it is to be in love?"

The handsome young face that Felix was looking into grew dark with passion.

"I know what it is to hate!" was the quick reply, given with a raw sincerity that for an instant startled the questioner out of his own concerns.

"Do ye, by gad? You seem to mean it, too!" cried he. "Well, I feel I'm in a fair way to hate someone pretty badly before this infernal business is done with! The fact is, I'm head and ears in love with another woman."

Demas regarded him with faint interest. This was the first flesh-and-blood specimen of the genus amoroso that he had come across. Of his own experience he knew no more of such matters than a boy. The words of an old-time poet rang through his mind, conjured up from memory by the force of his companion's emotion, and continued to haunt him in snatches even while Felix was speaking.

Shepheard, what's Love, I pray thee tell?
It is that fountaine, and that well,
Where pleasure and repentance dwell:
It is, perhaps, that sauncing bell,
That toules all into heaven or hell:
And this is Love, as I heard tell.

And again:

Yet what is Love, good Shepheard, show?
A thing that creepes, it cannot goe;
A prize that passeth to and fro,
A thing for one, a thing for moe,
And he that prooves shall find it so,
And, Shepheard, this is Love, I trow.

"Yes," Felix was saying, "to call it bad isn't half stating the case. To love an angel to distraction, and to be pitchforked into marriage with a hedge-jumping country hoyden, who'll disgrace me every time she opens her mouth—a scheming young minx who thinks to climb into society on a horse's back—a trolloping grenadier of a woman—in fact, a detestable Amazon!"

"Can't you get out of it?" asked Demas as the vituperation came to an end.

"Damnation! Haven't I told you I can't? And yet I'd sell my soul to do it!"

He stood staring fiercely into the heart of the glowing logs, his hands clenched and the veneer of his fine breeding broken through by genuine emotion. Yet Demas, watching him with a half-interest, was not deceived. Here was a man of little stability or strength, whose anger was tinctured by petulance, and who lacked the force to save his own happiness. He found it hard not to regard Felix Peverell with some contempt.

He gave a short laugh.

"There's a way out of everything, if one can only find it," said he. "But, of course, 'tis your own affair."

"I know that," said Felix shortly. He recovered himself, sat down again, and began drinking freely. Demas had taken little, but the wine had exhilarated him unduly, coming as it did at the end of a twenty-four hours' fast. On either side, tongues became freer and the conversation more intimate.

"And to think," cried Felix, "that I've been toasting that hussy as a goddess for the past fortnight! A goddess and an angel! Oh, Lord!—now I only think of her as a fiend!"

"If I hated any woman as much as that," said Demas slowly, "I'd thank heaven for the chance of making her my wife."

"You would? In the devil's name, why?"

"Because, after I'd married her, I'd set myself to humble her, to crush her proud spirit, to make her know me for her master. She shouldn't be my wife, but my servant, my slave. She should wait upon me in fear. She should serve me with trembling. Oh, but I would teach her many things! Many bitter things! She and hers should learn—to regret."

Felix, struck by the quality of his companion's tone, stared at him across the table. Their eyes met. Demas's were glowing darkly, full of a concentrated passion that the other, even in the height of his railing, had not touched.

"Yes," he went on, leaning forward a few inches; "you said you'd sell your soul to get out of this marriage. I tell you, I'd sell mine for your chance of becoming Bathia Loveridge's master!"

Felix swore softly. He had stumbled upon a hidden passion, and the heat and glare of it bewildered him. He fell back upon trivialities, seeking a more commonplace grasp of the situation.

"How do you know it is Bathia Loveridge?" cried he.

"That's easy to see. You spoke of your bet last time I talked to you."

"Of course! . . . Oh, curse the bet! I wish to hell my brother had never seen the jade!" He gripped Demas's arm nervously. "The girl refuses to ride unless one of us marries her. My lying brother has told her he's married already, and has laid it upon me. And—fool that I've been!—I daren't refuse. He showed me exactly what my position is. Oh, he's a devil for logic, Gervis is! And he was right—most damnably right! That's the curse of it. I'm hemmed in all round and can't raise a finger to help myself. I've thought of nothing else for hours, and it only seems to make things more hopeless. I've got to marry her, or see myself ruined for life."

"And if the race is run, and she wins it?" asked Demas in a low voice.

"Oh, I'll be free from all financial embarrassments then. But I'll have lost my chance of what I want most in the world."

"The other woman?"

Felix nodded, and stared moodily at his wine.

Demas turned his burning eyes away, and also fell into silence. Across his thoughts, for no apparent reason, there drifted again the words of the old poet.

Yet what is Love, good Shepheard, show?

. . . .

A prize that passeth to and fro,
A thing for one, a thing for moe,
And he that prooves shall find it so.

He impatiently shook the lines from him, and turned back to Felix Peverell.

"Miss Loveridge is not in love with you, I think you said."

"How could she be? We've never seen each other."

Demas pondered that statement. While he was doing so, Felix, aware in spite of his own troubles, of something strange, intense, inflammatory, about his companion, watched him curiously.

"You've seen her, I suppose," he said at length.

"Yes. I've seen her."

"What's the creature like, eh?"

"Proud and heartless. A worthy child of her father."

"Oh, Lord, that sounds promising!"

Silence again.

Then Demas raised his head. His look was alert and eager, so that the other cried out to know what was in his mind, before he spoke. He leant across the table, fixing Felix with his eyes.

"Miss Loveridge, you say, has never seen you. Is there an elopement arranged? For I suppose this marriage is none of her father's making."

"Just so. I'm to meet the girl secretly to-morrow evening. To settle the details of her flight. I wish to God she'd take a dislike to me when she sees me!"

"Answer me this! If a man, other than yourself, were to keep this appointment, and call himself by your name, would she have any reason to disbelieve him?"

"Ha!" cried Felix. He pushed the table litter aside, and leant his elbows on the board, so that the two flushed faces nearly met.

"Answer me! Would she?"

"Not if the other man was also a stranger to her."

"Yes, yes; that's granted, of course. You think, in that case, that she'd take him for what he said he was?"

Felix Peverell, catching the drift of the other's insinuations, and seeing an unexpected rift in the cloud of his embarrassments, sprang up, and clapped his hand on Demas's shoulder.

"I'll tell you what I think," cried he. "If a young fellow, well-bred and well-dressed, was to meet the Loveridge girl at the end of the lane to-morrow at dusk, and tell her he was Felix Peverell, she'd believe it like a lamb, fall on his neck—and begin searching in his pockets to see if he'd brought the wedding-ring!"

But there was no levity in Demas Chaldecott's voice, as, shaking off Felix's clasp, he replied:

"Sit down. Let's talk. You see what's in my mind?"

"I remember what you said just now."

"I meant what I said. You've given me the chance. You don't want to marry this girl; I do. Well?"

"Well, you're damned welcome to her, that's all I have to say. Marry her in my name as soon as you like, and I'll bless the happy pair like a father! But"—Felix grew suddenly sober—"she's got to ride; mind that!"

"I've not forgotten. By God, sir, when she's my wife she shall ride to hell if I bid her!"

"And a very proper sentiment in any bridegroom!" cried Felix with a laugh. "But you've got to swear to keep mum about your identity until the race is over."

"You needn't be afraid," said Demas. To him, the matter of the race was a mere trivial accessory to the one important issue—the possible subjugation of Bathia Loveridge, and through her, of her father, by himself. His flesh burned anew at the thought of rendering double for every stripe and insult which he had received. Carried out of himself by the unnatural physical conditions of this wine-drinking and his unusual company, he was in no mood to look for difficulties, or to find weaknesses in his plan. The ardour of his temperament, his long germinating rebelliousness, his recent illness and subsequent morbid brooding, all played a part in the hatching of a scheme as wild as was ever contemplated for the undoing of an enemy. If the man before him had hesitated over giving his consent, Demas Chaldecott would have wrung it from him by the sheer force of his own irresistible passion.

But Felix Peverell, seeing in the plot the means of outwitting his brother without shipwrecking himself, did not hesitate for an instant. He was equally ready with Demas to use his companion's desires as the lever to advance his own. Nor did his buoyant nature find any deterrent in the conjecture as to what his brother's attitude would be on learning of the trick whereby Felix would still remain his rival for the favours of Diana Woodland. The exhibition of the confiscated love-letter, and his subsequent disgrace with Lord Maumbury, would lose much of their point, once he was firmly established by the increment assured by Bathia Loveridge's winning of the race.

The only person to whom neither Demas Chaldecott nor Felix Peverell gave a generous thought was Bathia Loveridge herself.

"I'll go away and lie low until I hear from you," said Felix. "There mustn't be two Felix Peverells existing at once, or the girl may get wind of it, and kick the whole concern over, curse her! The race comes off about the middle of next month. How soon can you get the marriage over?"

"Next week," said Demas recklessly. "The sooner the better! But I'll let you know."

"Oh, have it as soon as you please," cried Felix. "'Tis bad enough hiding from the duns. Hiding from a prospective bride will be worse. I'll send you an address as soon as I've found one. By gad, you'll have a double identity until the wedding is over, and I'll have none at all! What a comedy! What a tale to tell at the clubs later—ha, ha!"

"This is no laughing matter to me," said Demas. "I'm in damned sober earnest."

"So am I! How the devil you're going to manage it is more than I can tell with that cursed wine singing in my head. But I leave all that to you, and devilish glad to do it, too. You're the finest fellow I've met in this dusty old world—damned if you're not! And, if you ever want a favour of me, don't be afraid to ask, my boy. Remember that."

"I'll remember it," said Demas.

And later on when he claimed that promise, it was a strange favour that he asked.

"And now," cried Felix boisterously, for his volatile spirits had gone up with a bound, "now I'll give you a toast."

He filled the glasses, and raised his own above his head.

"The future Mrs. Chaldecott!" he cried.

He drank off the wine, and, laughing, threw the glass over his shoulder.

Demas went farther. He flung the wine backwards into the fireplace before he smashed his glass upon the floor.

XV

THE COLD WOOING

Demas was waiting at the end of the lane.

It might have been supposed that all emotions possible to such a situation had been drawn out long ago by the unending succession of appointment-keeping suitors. Yet here was one to whom not only was the circumstance in itself novel, but who, in his own person, brought an element of strangeness into a thread-worn occupation. For it might have been questioned whether any wooer before had ever sought his lady with precisely the same sentiments. Forced wooings, involving of necessity repugnance, if not positive aversion, have halted the unwilling feet of the lover, but Demas Chaldecott, in his capacity as such, had not loitered. Rather a spirit of eagerness had brought him to the spot before the time.

His mind had not changed. The inception of the scheme had occurred during an hour of mental and physical exhilaration, but the cold sombre light of the next day had found him still firmly set upon the wild plan. If his intellect had cooled at all, it was only the keener to arrange the details. And in his judgment the difficulties were not insurmountable.

Felix Peverell had left him a free hand, and had taken himself away from the theatre of operations on the next morning. Assured of his departure, Demas gave no more heed to the young man himself, but proceeded to adopt his identity with a steady coolness that only testified to the passionate determination behind.

It grew dusk while he waited half-hidden from chance observation against the naked hedgerows, and though he took this precaution he had the place to himself. A chilly wind was blowing across from the distant sea, and gave a promise of rain. It was not an ideal setting for a rapturous meeting. But Demas's lack of experience prevented this fact from making any special appeal to him. Moreover, he imagined that the lady was bringing to the interview a businesslike perception of her own advantage, and no more regarded the appointment as an amorous encounter than did himself.

Then she was almost at his side before he was aware.

Turning from his absorbed contemplation of the empty highway, he found his eyes checked in their involuntary glance up the lane by a slim girlish figure that was hurrying towards him. He stiffened himself, and waited for her approach.

" Mr. Peverell? "

He bowed.

" You—you were expecting me."

" I have been waiting for Miss Loveridge," said Demas.

As he spoke he put his scheme to the first test by moving forward a little, and turning his face so that the last of the daylight might fall upon it. Also, he set his eyes full upon hers. After a moment, he knew that the initial question of her possible recognition of him had been satisfactorily answered. Apparently, on the former occasion of her proximity to him—the only occasion of which he was aware—she had been too much occupied with the management of her horse to pay heed to the victim of her escapade. With the unreasonableness of a man smarting under a sense of intolerable wrong, Demas was well-pleased that she did not recall his face, but he disliked her anew for never having noticed it.

" I am Bathia Loveridge," said she.

" I guessed as much," he returned. " I was told—my brother told me—that you wished to see me."

" Yes," she breathed; adding still more softly : " Did he tell you why? "

" He did, Miss Loveridge."

" Yes? " she asked.

" I think," said Demas, " my presence here is a sufficient answer to your message."

" Ah! "

It was a long sigh; of relief assuredly, but her companion's prejudiced ear read into it the expression of her satisfied ambition and inordinate pride. He looked at her more closely, taking in her figure as well as her features. She was holding herself very erect, and her rounded limbs showed their shapely proportions beneath her dress. She was garbed in some heavy material of a dark green shade, and her bosom was laced across with strips of braid, suggesting a fulness which did not exist, for she was slenderly made, and easy of carriage. Her deep blue eyes, almost black they seemed in the dusky light, met his quite frankly, with no sign of any emotional embarrassment now that the first awkwardness of the meeting was passed. For, truly enough, Bathia had not come for love-making, but for business.

This was apparent in her next speech.

" You must tell me quickly what you are going to do," she said. " I dare not stay long, for although my father is absent, my stepmother may miss me."

" Have you made any plans? " Demas asked.

" No. I have left all that to you."

He moved forward a few paces, she at his side, dependent, though he did not appreciate it at the time, and questioning.

" You understand, of course," he said, " what this meeting stands for. I accept your conditions. You also accept—ours."

She nodded quickly.

" I will ride for you after our marriage," she said without embarrassment.

Her coolness angered him anew. But he schooled himself to a similar temper, and replied with composure equal to hers.

"Very well, then. On those two points we need not speak. It only remains to decide how our arrangements are to be managed. By licence we can be married at any time, I believe. I will make inquiry. And since you may be followed, it will be as well for the marriage to take place as soon after your leaving home as possible. At Parley church, for instance. It is, I understand, out of your parish, and you are less likely to be known there."

"No. I am not known there at all. Stay—yes; one man knows me, but he is my friend. Indeed, I shall probably have to ask him to help me to escape."

"Who is he?"

"My father's gardener. Puddy by name. He lives near the church. Now I think of it, I believe he is the sexton."

"Very good," said Demas. "You must leave your home early in the morning, and come straight to the church. I will join you there with the parson, and the thing can be done at once. After you are my wife," he added, for the solace of his own soul, "no man, not even your father, can touch you. Can you do as I suggest?"

"Easily. With Puddy's help. When shall it be?"

The undisguised eagerness in her voice and manner stirred his animosity again. He took a pleasure in delaying his answer for a moment or so.

"I think," he told her, after the pause, "that I can manage to get all the arrangements made by—next Monday."

He heard her draw a deep breath.

"Yes; that will do," she said. "I will meet you at the church as early as you please."

He turned on her with a barely concealed anger, was about to remind her, in the character of Felix Peverell, that the arrangements were more for her pleasure than his own, and checked himself, lest his impetuosity should lead to an open rupture of no benefit to anyone.

"On Monday, then," he said. "Eight o'clock will be soon enough, I think. But if you are wise you will explain your errand to none whom you may happen to meet. There is not much likelihood of anyone else being there, but I had better warn you."

"Thank you. I shall tell no one," she said, still in the matter-of-fact way that had served her throughout the interview. "Have you anything more to say?"

"No. You may leave the rest to me. If I have any need to communicate with you before Monday, can I trust this gardener—what is he called, did you say?"

She told him, and he heard the familiar name without a sign of recognition.

"You may trust him entirely," she added eagerly.

"But do not, if you value the success of your plans," urged Demas then, "—do not attempt to reach me, either through this man or by any other means. I cannot even tell you where I shall stay in the meanwhile. Certainly not at the inn. In fact, I left there this morning."

"You judged that prudent?" questioned she; then acquiesced, with a little grave inclination of her head. "Yes. You are right, Mr. Peverell. My father has no love for your house, and if he learnt of your presence here there is no telling what might happen. When he is angry, no man can withstand him."

Demas clenched his hands under the folds of his long coat, and his shame was hot upon him once more. What need was there for this cool-voiced young madam to remind him of that? Let her beware even of such unwitting taunts, for she surely made them to her own undoing!

He faced her again in a kind of subdued rage. Her composure maddened him. Only by an effort could he refrain from hissing "You fool, you shall be fooled!" at her. But instead he merely answered with commonplace words.

"Something of all this was in my mind," he told her glibly. "For, believe me, your father's temper is well-known."

"Yes," said Bathia absently.

She was gazing at him with some earnestness, and though she had spoken of haste, and there was apparently little more to be said on either side, she still lingered in his company. The truth was, though she hardly knew it herself, that this emotionally-starved girl was waiting for just that little more which it would have been natural for him to say. In spite of his studied coldness and her own well-maintained composure, some sense of the personal issues had crept into the end of the interview—on her side at least.

She began to realize that this man, young, personable beyond her thought, and of an address which, save for its lack of ardour, left nothing to be desired, was now her acknowledged lover and was soon to be her husband. Unconsciously her femininity thrilled to the thought, and the first glowing hues of romance faintly tinged the drabness of her purely business-like proposal.

Yet he said nothing; did not take the chance which her silence offered him to speak one word in which her listening ear could read the promise of a yet unrevealed tenderness.

Her eyes fell; his remained unabashed. She drew back a pace, and thought that she understood. He was taking her at her own commercial valuation. Romance blushed and took flight. After all, she was not certain that she desired the transaction to be placed upon a higher plane. Her manner insensibly changed; became proud and distant, to his misconstruing ear.

"I must go back," she breathed. "I think there is no more to say."

Demas, for all the myriad of thoughts agitating his own bosom, could find nothing to add to that. Seeing which, the girl put out her hand. He took it lightly in his fingers and released it almost immediately.

"Good-bye, Mr. Peverell."

"Good evening, Miss Loveridge."

And again he was alone.

Thus ended the first part of Demas Chaldecott's cold wooing.

He returned home not displeased with the episode. It had passed off as smoothly as he had hoped, and he did not regret the smallest step which he had so far taken. He was therefore able to make his next move without the hindering influence of a nascent compunction.

Before the day was ended he wrote to Parson Willavize. The letter was not fully explanatory, but it indicated his purpose sufficiently clearly to be highly interesting to its recipient, and contained, moreover, an urgent request for the parson's immediate presence. The next morning he walked over to *The Horse and Jockey* and placed it in the mail-bag for that day's collection. At the same time he was handed a missive addressed to himself, which had been delivered overnight too late to be carried to him before dark. It bore an embossed coronet in one corner and had an immense red seal, impressed with the crest of the Peverells.

He opened it on his way back with a little dread and burning of the face. It was in his mind that the shameful story of the flogging had reached Lord Maumbury at last. But the letter, though it ran to some length, suggested no knowledge of the affair. After a preamble consisting mainly of pious exhortations, much in the manner of a Paul to a Timothy—which good advice Demas read with his eyes alone—the letter took a sudden turn and came abruptly to what was apparently the point of the writer when penning it:

". . . I hope that you have given good heed to the matter which engaged our attention at our recent interview.

I refer, of course, to your proposed union with the girl Julia Trickett, a match, as I endeavoured at the same time to point out, highly desirable from all standpoints of view. Of your own personal advantage in thus carrying out my desire, I say nothing, leaving your past experience of our relations to speak for my appreciation of ready obedience to my wishes. I prefer to dwell upon your undoubted obligations to a Higher Source. As a Christian man you cannot fail to see the matter in its true light, provided that you seek the Divine Aid as your unfailing Guide in all things. To such prayerful meditation I commend you, in full confidence of the result, merely venturing, in all humility, to entreat you not to allow your vainglorious desire of this world's empty advantages to cause you to despise an alliance with one of humble origin. An honest and God-fearing maid is never despicable in the eyes of a Christian-minded man, be her birth what it may. Should you desire further counsel and help from a mere earthly sinner like yourself, do not fear to approach me on the subject, and believe me always to have your true welfare at my heart.

"Your sincere friend and well-wisher,

"MAUMBURY AND PALLADOUR."

Then came a post scriptum, scrawled across the foot of the page, in another hand—

"For God's sake, Demas, pay no heed to all this!"

Demas put the letter thoughtfully away.

So! Parson Willavize had been again with Lord Maumbury, and had contrived unseen to dash those emphatic words of nullification across the importunities of the earl. Doubtless some talk on the old subject had led to the writing of the letter. At any other time, the young man would have been idly amused at the apparently meaningless conflict of the two vigorous wills. But now, utterly unmoved by his patron's exhortations, both spiritual and matrimonial, he merely grasped the fact that the parson had put a very neat little weapon into his hand.

He made no attempt to reply to Lord Maumbury's missive, and, in fact, save for the part that it might play in his own schemes dismissed it from his mind as belonging to that portion of his life which he was bent upon breaking with for ever. For the rest, nothing could be further settled until Parson Willavize presented himself.

For that event, he had not long to wait. Within thirty-six hours of the despatching of his summons, the parson was at his side.

Both were eager to plunge into the matter at once. The elder man began it, starting before he had swallowed a mouthful of his first meal after his journey.

" Upon my soul, young man," he cried, " a pretty dance you've led me! Though, for that matter, you've been in my mind ever since we parted. I was debating whether I'd risk my precious neck on these infernal roads for the sake of your affairs, when your letter came. What's it all about, you villain, eh? "

" I'm going to get married," said Demas when he was allowed to speak.

" The devil you are! When? To-morrow at latest, I suppose, since you sent for me in such a desperate hurry."

" Next Monday."

The parson stared, and swore softly.

" By Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego," he cried then, " you don't lose much time when you've once got the matrimonial bit fairly between your teeth! But, 'fore God, you rascal, I'm not going to have anything to do with it. Don't you think so! "

" Sit down, and listen," said Demas, unmoved.

" 'Tis all a mistake," affirmed the other, hot of face and manner. " Julia—— "

" It's not Julia," said Demas.

The parson sat down and frowned at him.

" Not Julia? Why, I thought—— "

Demas smiled without amusement.

" Oh, I got Lord Maumbury's letter right enough, if that's what you mean," he said.

" Well? "

" The marriage hasn't anything to do with that. It was resolved upon before I received his lordship's—commands."

" Well? " said the parson again. He spoke like a man across whose perplexity a distasteful gleam of enlightenment appears. " Well, who is the lady? "

" I thought you might have guessed, sir. Miss Loveridge, of course."

The parson mopped his forehead. Then he broke into a roar of laughter.

" You sly dog! " he chuckled. " I believe you had it in your mind all along! "

He might have deceived a stranger, but Demas saw through the pretence. It angered him.

" I assure you, sir," said he, " I am thoroughly in earnest."

The parson suddenly became sober.

" You'd better explain," he said tartly.

Demas did so. As he spoke his companion grew grave even to sternness. Seeing which, the young man's mouth also hardened, and he fell to fingering the letter in his pocket, as a card-player may toy pleasantly with his best trump. When he had made an end, the parson got to his feet. There was no appreciable difference in their inches, but the elder man had the advantage in bulk, and now stood squarely, like one ready to floor his opponent.

"I'll see you to hell, Demas Chaldecott, before I take you out into the world again," he began. "All this villainy comes of that one visit to Dorchester, and because you couldn't keep your tongue still about what you heard there."

Demas flushed. His eyes shot bright reproach.

"You never blamed me before," he said.

"Well—I do now, most damnably. You weren't fool enough to think I'd consent to such arch-villainy, were you?"

Demas looked sullen.

"I'm going back home," announced the parson. "D'ye hear?—at once!"

"What's your objection, sir?" asked Demas coolly. "You might at least tell me that."

"It doesn't require telling," retorted Willavize; "or wouldn't, if you had any conscience left. You want to fool a woman. There's enough to bring any honest man's anathema upon you. I'm disappointed in you; I'm——"

"Don't curse me just yet," said Demas. "Listen."

"I've heard enough."

"No. You've not heard all."

"No? Then, by the Lord, you're a worse villain than I took you for!"

Demas shrugged his shoulders.

"Being virtuous didn't bring me much credit," he said with some bitterness. "I've set my mind on this thing, and not all the parsons in the land can turn me from it."

The member of the fraternity who sat before him suddenly narrowed his eyes to a close scrutiny. His manner grew quieter as he looked.

"You're your father over again," he said unexpectedly.

"I don't want to hear of him!" cried Demas, throwing back his head with a singular gesture. "What has he to do with this?"

"Nothing. Only—he died, as I've told you, in Flanders. And I was just wishing that you were there, too."

"Come, sir," said Demas impatiently, "are you going to agree to marry me to Miss Loveridge next Monday?"

"I'm not. How the devil could I, if I wanted to? Even with my consent, your plan's impracticable. You seem to think that a bride, a bridegroom, and a parson are all that's needed for a wedding. There are other things."

"What things?"

"The legalities, of course."

"A licence, you mean."

"Yes—a special one, too, to get married as soon as you suggest. And witnesses. How do you suppose you could pass for another man in a place where you're known?"

Demas grew still more thoughtful. The earnestness of his eyes was worthy of a better purpose.

"Ah, that's a difficulty I hadn't reckoned with," he admitted. "Still, I daresay it can be met. The marriage, I judged, had best take place as soon as possible, lest Miss Loveridge's flight be discovered early—that is, it had better take place here."

"Demas, I refuse to discuss the matter with you," the parson struck in. "I'm amazed at your turpitude. I'm not sure you couldn't be indicted for abduction."

"Hardly, I think. The lady has seen me, and comes to me willingly."

"Believing you to be young Peverell," said the parson drily. "You don't seem to realize that you're acting in a dishonourable way."

Again Demas shrugged his shoulders. The movement gave a sense of abrasion to the tender skin. His face flushed darkly.

"A man who's been treated as her father treated me hasn't much honour left to consider," said he.

"Honour," said Parson Willavize sententiously, "is not from without but within."

Demas said nothing, but looked unrepentant.

The parson came over and laid his hand on his arm.

"Come!" he said gently. "I'm fond of you, Demas, and for your own sake I'm not proud of you at this moment. You were vilely used; that I grant. But this scheme of vengeance is unworthy of a gentleman and a Christian."

"You've been talking to Lord Maumbury," said Demas pointedly. He drew out the coroneted letter, and spread it open on the table. "You've read it, I conclude," he added, laying his finger on the parson's own line.

Willavize nodded, a dull flush deepening the already rubicund hue of his face.

"Yes; I got him to let me close it for him—he wasn't well at the time. I was barely back from Dorchester when you sent for me. . . . Well?"

" Well, sir; either you help me to do what I propose and allow me to free myself from Lord Maumbury's patronage and dictates for ever, or—I obey him scrupulously in all things."

" You mean——? "

" That unless you help me to the marriage I have planned for myself, I shall make the one which his lordship has arranged for me."

" Good God ! You're not in love with Julia ! "

" Nor with Miss Loveridge. But you see now what you may force me into."

" Do you really mean this ? " cried the outraged parson, redder than ever.

Demas smiled—a cool sarcastic smile. In his heart he was not sure that he did. But the strength of his position lay in the fact that the parson could not be certain one way or the other. Nothing makes for capitulation like a doubt as to the issue involved by holding on.

" You've refused my lord point-blank already," said the vacillating victim.

" Further persuasion," said Demas, indicating the open sheet. " If I can't have my own way in the one thing I've ever desired with all my strength and all my soul and all my mind—then I may as well throw in my lot with Lord Maumbury for good and all."

He spoke with a kind of light hardness which was new to the parson's ear, and which somehow carried an unpleasant sense of conviction.

The elder man pondered awhile; the younger watched him. With the indifference of his age he had scarcely troubled to ask himself why the parson threw a thousand obstacles in the way of his union with the young maid living under his own honourable protection. It was enough for the schemer that his friend had a reason.

" Well ? " he asked at length.

The parson looked savage.

" It can't be done by Monday," he said roughly.

Demas made no comment on the implied capitulation, merely asking :

" How soon, then ? "

" I can't say off-hand. There are arrangements to be made. The question is—who's to make them ? "

" You can," said Demas.

" We shall want money. I suppose you don't intend to apply to my lord for it. "

It was the parson's one coarseness, and under it Demas stiffened.

"I have enough," he said. "As for a ring—there is my mother's."

"Your mother's, eh?" Parson Willavize looked reminiscent. "H'm. Yes. Is that lucky, though?" he added.

"Lucky enough for me!"

He marched to the window, and stood with his dark passionate eyes staring at the dreary prospect of stripped hedgerows and dun-coloured meadows. Behind his back, the parson grimaced. The business was not to his taste; but the conscience of Evurtius Willavize had been in the market before, and was growing a little dulled with being frequently let out on hire.

Presently he tapped the young man on the shoulder.

"If any mischief comes of all this, Mr. Felix Peverell," said he, "don't blame me; that's all."

Demas turned. There was an air of easy determination about him that the other, who thought he knew him by heart, had not seen before. It was as though the ardent restless nature had found a pivot around which to revolve at last.

"I take it all upon my own head," he answered recklessly. "Though I don't see what mischief is likely to come from it, other than what I intend."

The parson shook his head at him.

"That's the devil of all human affairs," he said. "We never do see." . . . .

But, though he had tacitly consented, his mind was not easy. At odd moments throughout the day that bartered conscience of his gave unexpected twinges. It was only when the night season might be supposed to give a truer vision to the inner senses by eliminating all the distracting influences of the outward, that he stumbled happily upon a conviction. So exceedingly relieved did he immediately become that the whole affair appeared in a ludicrous light, inasmuch as he sat up in bed and chuckled beneath his nodding night-cap.

"The bare idea of it!" he told himself risibly. "Preposterous notion! The young fool! He. . . . Demas Chaldecott . . . to go about to break a woman's heart! Ha, ha!"

XVI

THE GREY BRIDAL

Custom has decreed that a bride, to satisfy the proprieties, must be married in white. Bathia Loveridge might have been said, metaphorically speaking, to be married in grey.

It was in the mirk of a wan winter's dawn that she left her home, slipping fearfully down the ladder which Jeremiah had left overnight beneath her window, and hearing, in every pulsation of her own heart, the footsteps of a pursuing father. But she reached the outskirts of the grounds in safety, and heard the faint click of the gate as it fell to behind her. It was the moment of which she had dreamed feverishly all night.

She did not wait for any possible chance of discovery occasioned by the one sound which her flight had caused. Once in the lane outside she fled down it like a hare. A pathetic element in her departure lay in the fact that there was no sentimental reason for lingering. Her one pet, Sweetwilliam, had been led away from the stables a couple of days ago, thereby frustrating her original intention of taking her favourite with her. There was nothing else to stay for.

True, this had been her childhood's home, and therefore should have possessed fragrant memories. But it had none. The silent repression of her earliest years; the unnatural rearing of her girlhood; its marked loneliness until the coming of the pious widow who had brought only her own perverted judgments and dicta, and had ventilated the girl's grievances not at all; the settled gloom of her father's creed and the cold conventionality of his wife's—all these had pressed heavily enough to constitute a very maelstrom of memory, but the recollection of it all was as of the distortions of a nightmare. Eagerness was in her flight, and relief, and a half-timid, half-joyous anticipation of better things.

The grey gloom overhead slowly lightened, but the new day came wan and raw. The dampness of the still air was chilly and penetrating; great drops of moisture hung heavily to branches and withered leaves; the wayside grasses were drooping beneath the same weight. As yet no creature stirred. It was a bare and empty world into which the escaping girl fled.

Yet, so detached had her life hitherto been, she was conscious of no sense of loneliness as she sped down the lane and out into the open road. And though from time to time she shivered in every limb, it was rather from excitement than from physical discomfort. Only once did she stay her hurrying feet. The house, as seen from the high road, was behind her when she paused for a brief moment, and, turning, looked back at it. Imagination ran riot, and painted a terrifying scene. Discovery of the ladder—her absence detected—pursuit—capture. Tingling from head to foot, she turned again and ran until she was gasping and exhausted.

By that time she had come to the point where, in order to reach the meeting-place with the greatest secrecy, it was necessary to mount the bank and obtain access to the Maumbury lands. Glancing round from this vantage ground, she was satisfied to find neither the signs of pursuit behind, nor the promise of observation before. She thereupon scrambled through the hedge, somewhat broken in this quarter by Demas Chaldecott's unscrupulous use of the same short cut, and struck across the dripping pasture land beyond.

Here was the same monotony of drab and grey, the same isolation, the same dull silence. Once or twice a bird of the larger sort flew up before her from the sad-coloured grass and took itself off on heavy wings. Depression lurked in the long grey hedgerows, lowered down upon the girl from the overhanging skies, and loomed at her from the misty horizon. With her sensitiveness to such impressions it was unavoidable, now that the proceeding had descended from the adventurous to the inevitable, that something of the dejection which brooded over the natural world should begin to creep into her heart.

A soft melancholy lent a wistful expression to her face as she hastened forward to begin her new life. The feeling was merely temperamental, and bore no relation either to regret or to apprehension. Had a thunderstorm raged, she would have drawn fresh energy from its defiant element, or had the sun shone in an unclouded heaven, she would have been as joyous a bride as ever danced at a wedding festival.

And so, in due time, she came within sight of the little wooden steeple of the church, and regaining the roadway stole fearfully past Jeremiah's cottage, which stood silent and smokeless in the misty air, and pushing open the churchyard gate walked into the grounds, and felt that one stage of her strange journey was done.

The hour was still early—too early, she knew, to expect the arrival of her swain. So, after trying the wooden gates that shut off the tiny carved porch and barred the entrance to the church, and finding them locked, she gave herself up to a period of waiting.

And now, almost, it seemed, for the first time since her eyes had shuddered open on this eventful morning, she had leisure to think. Hitherto, she had done little in that way, having already given her mind into the keeping of the man in whose hands her future would shortly lie. Since that meeting at the end of the lane, she had not seen him at all —and had received only one message.

This had reached her circuitously through Parson Willavize and Jeremiah, and had merely notified the necessary postponement of the marriage. Her whole attitude had been one of acquiescence and faith; acquiescence in her future husband's judgment, faith in his integrity. There had been only her personal escape, involving the bribing of Jeremiah, to think about. Or so it had seemed. Now, under the gloomy skies of open heaven, beneath the shadow of the ancient church, the solemnity of the thing which she was about to do pressed upon her.

Under the branches of that same yew where Demas had learnt the meaning of shame and helpless agony, a small sundial had been fashioned out of the two-foot stump of a similar tree. How ancient it was might be dimly computed, since it must have been contrived when its neighbour was a mere sapling. Now the dense overhanging boughs prevented any clear ray of sunlight from illuminating the dial, from which the gnomon had perished, and where the markings had become indistinguishable. Bathia sat down upon it, to wait and to think. . . .

Shy birds her thoughts proved—as shy as the white-headed robin that perched on a mouldering headstone and flew away without a note of song. All that she could think of was her already formed resolves to be a good wife, to do her best to retrieve the Peverell fortunes, to make her husband satisfied that he had married her. Of love, she did not think at all.

The time of waiting was long. She grew cold and hungry. Presently she rose, and approached the church once more. Suddenly a more purely feminine emotion than any which had swayed her hitherto, swept across her deeper feelings. She glanced at her attire. It was the same velvet dress which she had worn at the first meeting, half-hidden beneath a dove-coloured cloak. Sombre wear for a bride! Of such things she knew from hearsay, not from experience. Her empty hands for the first time embarrassed her.

She turned to the untidy shrub that bent itself in the angle formed by porch and church wall, and tore off a dozen sprays. The sound of the falling gate startled her before they were well arranged. She turned to see a female figure coming along the rising path. Mindful of her betrothed's warning, she set her lips firmly and faced about again. But the next sound to draw her attention was a chuckle at her elbow. Forced to turn, she met the bleary eyes of an old crone who smiled at her with sunken lips. Some instinct within the girl sent her back a pace.

"He, he, my dear," chuckled the newcomer; "so ye've a-coome afore thy groom; 'tes so. Must be in a tar'ble hurry to weddy, my maidy! He, he!"

Bathia's inexperience of the world missed the hateful innuendo, but her delicacy of spirit recognized something distasteful, even insulting, about the woman, and so her pale cheek flamed.

"Why do you speak of wedding?" she asked with innocent wariness. "And what are you doing here?"

The old woman lifted her apron to her shaking lips, and continued to chuckle behind it.

"There ben't no need to get into a pelt, my lëady," said she. "The passon and thy fancy man 'll be here so soon as they've a-finished their dewbit, and us'll see who'll talk o' weddens then. And doän't 'ee think, my beauty"—she touched the recoiling Bathia with a wrinkled finger—"doän't 'ee think as I do twite 'ee for marryen whiles ye can, for husbands doänt grow so thick as brembles, and tidden so eäsy to wed as 'tes to aggy, my dear."

Bathia moved away in silence. The presence of this creature, who apparently knew all about the business, still further depressed her. She longed anew for the others to come. But the crone refused to be shaken off.

"He, he, what a croustie maid 'tes!" mumbled she. "Wi' woone eye on the geäte arl the time! An', Lard-love-a-deary, what hast 'ee a-got in's han's? If tidden twigs o' the wold Carpse Bwox! He, he—martel pretty posy for a bride!"

In dismay Bathia opened her hands and let fall her sombre nosegay. Remembrance stirred. Was it not customary to strew these selfsame sprays upon the coffins of the dead, as they entered the church for the last time? She fell to shivering beneath her cloak.

"Lard-sakes, ye be fair blebbering!" exclaimed her obnoxious companion. But at that moment, to Bathia's relief, the churchyard gate clicked again, and a small knot of people entered the ground. Parson Willavize stepped up, balancing the key of the church in his broad fingers. He greeted Bathia with a bow, and addressed her in a brisk business-like tone.

"Miss Loveridge?"

"Yes," she said rather faintly.

"Ha—here is the gentleman you have come to meet. These," indicating the old woman and a man who had joined her, "—these are, of course, the witnesses. As we are all here we may as well get the business over at once. 'Tis an infernally draughty spot, madam, and I trust we haven't kept you waiting long."

"Not very long," said she. Her eyes had left his face and were seeking that of her bridegroom, who had shown no haste in seeking her side. He joined them now, and bowed, lover-like, over her hand. Young Peverell himself, the parson reflected with an acid humour, could not have done it more gracefully, or made a more gallant looking groom. For Demas had dressed for the part, bestowing more care upon his appearance than ever before, and though his look was a little strained the defect might have passed for a natural nervousness. Only his eyes, when they caught the parson's, grew somewhat hard and defiant.

To Bathia he said little, and readily made way for Willavize to escort her into the church. The damp and mouldering atmosphere of the building proved small relief from the raw chilliness of the air outside. The interior was of an almost twilight dimness, and the church mice could be heard pattering away as the small procession entered. The door clanged to behind the rustic couple. To the girl's quick imagination it typified the irrevocability of the union about to be formed.

The parson, still maintaining his business-like manner, opened a pew at the top of the church, handed her in, and disappeared into the vestry. Bathia sank to her knees inside the pew. Demas remained standing in the aisle. He looked at her a little sullenly, wishing that she had not done this. No prayer had arisen from his own heart or lips since he had taken the oath of which this marriage was to be the consummation. He frowned down upon her, but now more in unreasonable thought than in anger. Curiosity stirred; what did she pray for?

The parson reappeared. His rubicund face was the sole bright spot in the dusky chancel. The pale-faced bride arose, and the service began.

There was a suggestive solemnity in the parson's voice as he read out the introductory exhortation. He was, in effect, giving Demas his last chance. But a keen glance into the determined, slightly scornful young face showed him that the appeal was useless. He therefore went on . . .

"*I, Felix Theodore, take thee, Bathia . . .*"

No sign of faltering in the steady tones.

The response came with no less clearness and decision.

"*I, Bathia, take thee . . . to love, cherish, and to obey, until death us do part . . .*"

Parson Willavize breathed more easily. The thing, for good or ill, must now go on.

He joined the hands; Bathia's, wearing the twice-used ring, as cold as ice; Demas's, burning as with the fever of his recent illness. He saw the girl's quick wondering look at the contact, and noted that Demas kept his eyes fixed straight ahead, and made no answering sign. . . .

With a little breath of relief, the parson banged up his book, and motioned them all to follow him. A tattered curtain hung across the north transept, which was thus made to serve the purpose of a vestry. Willavize held it aside. Bride and bridegroom passed within.

Bathia drew back shuddering. A couple of windows gave a thin suffused light to this corner of the church, and quite plainly two objects met her direct gaze. Against the opposite wall stood a pair of coffin trestles, unlovely in their angular outlines and melancholy suggestiveness. It was the culminating moment to this ill-omened bride. She caught her companion's arm with a little sob, and signed away her maiden freedom through a mist of tears. . . .

Demas led her out into the open air. The others followed; the parson shut the door with a clang, locked the porch gates, and dismissed the witnesses with a crown a-piece.

"Well, now," said he then, "I've done my part according to orders, and I don't suppose you need me any longer. I'll therefore bid you good-morning, and wish you a happy journey."

Bathia, who seemed to have recovered her spirits somewhat, held out her hand.

"Thank you, sir," said she with a pretty dignity.

The parson had a pleasant courtesy of his own when he cared to practice it. He bent his bare head before her, and raised her fingers to his lips. Then he tapped Demas on the arm.

"A word with you, young sir," he said less pleasantly.

Demas walked a few yards with him.

"If you're not good to her," said Willavize in his ear, "I'm damned if I'll have anything more to do with you!"

Demas glanced back to where Bathia was waiting.

"You'll see," was all he said.

PART II

THE GIFT HORSE

The man who stole a horse was sent overseas to a foreign land.

I

THE END OF THE FIRST STAGE

Bathia came forward a step or two, her whole attitude interrogatory. As Demas continued silent she was forced to put her anxiety into words.

" Is anything wrong ? "

He looked at her, silent for a moment longer, then—

" No," he told her. " Why do you ask ? What should there be ? "

" I am glad," she said frankly. She made shift to smile into his gloomy face. " What are we going to do now ? " she added.

Demas had his plans ready up to a certain point.

" Why," said he, " I think if we are wise we shall get away from here as soon as possible."

" Of course," she assented. They began to walk side by side down the path. " Where are we going ? " she inquired.

Her attitude was one of child-like trust. Again he turned to look at her. Unbidden, the question framed itself—Was this the spirited and careless girl who had allowed her horse to knock him down and had ridden off without a word ? Was she even the ambitious woman who had agreed to make a public exhibition of herself on the chance of winning a possible coronet ? While he was thinking, Bathia put another question.

" Are you taking me to your brother's wife ? "

" My brother's—— ? Oh ! . . . No; not to her."

" Well," said the girl with a little restful sigh, " at least, you know best. Let us get quickly away from here."

But at the gate, as he was turning off towards the ferry, she paused and touched his arm.

" Wait for one moment ! " she said.

" What is it ? " he asked impatiently. The impulse to hasten away from the place was strong upon him. But it had its origin neither in the fear of Squire Loveridge, nor in the shameful memories of the churchyard. Inexplicably to himself, it seemed to go deeper than either of these.

Bathia had turned towards the parsonage.

"The schoolmaster lives here," she said. "I want to see him for a moment. I must. It won't take long."

"Why do you wish to see him?" asked Demas, frowning.

"Because I hurt him once, by accident, and my horse carried me away before I could apologize. I came to do so later; but I could not speak to him then. Now I am going away, and may not have another opportunity."

Demas could find no answer immediately. He felt as a man might feel who sees a carefully propped-up structure of his own contriving fall to the ground—dumb, and a little bewildered. Bathia began to move away. He suddenly, in an access of apprehension, caught her arm.

"Stay!" he said. "The man's a worthless fellow, I fancy. You needn't trouble about him."

"Worthless?" repeated the girl with large serious eyes. "Oh, surely not. I saw him praying in the church, before the altar. That was why I could not speak to him."

"Good God!" cried Demas with a little jarring laugh. "You saw that, did you? Come away! I begin to suspect the fellow's a bigger scoundrel than I took him for. Come away, I say!"

"Please!" said Bathia.

"No use!" Demas drew her in the opposite direction as he spoke. "The man's away from home. But I'll see that he has your message."

"That will do," said she.

They crossed the meadow in silence. Demas was trying to readjust his values; Bathia was absorbed in too much physical and mental discomfort to try to probe his apparent displeasure. The meadow, moreover, was none too safe walking, and the thoughtful man moving a few steps in advance of her had left her to find firm foothold unaided. He had arranged for the ferry-boat to be left on this side of the river, and accordingly was now able to cross the river with his bride unnoticed. Bathia stepped into the boat, and sprang from it, resentfully oblivious of his outstretched hand. As they passed up the sloping lane beyond, it was she who walked ahead.

Regarding her from this position, Demas noticed for the first time that her hands were empty. Overtaking her at the head of the slope, he addressed her more gently than he had hitherto done.

"Have you brought nothing with you?" he asked. His own baggage was waiting to be picked up at *The Horse and Jockey*.

In reply, Bathia shook her head. She neither spoke nor met his gaze, staring straight ahead of her. He saw the delicate curves of her profile. The underlip trembled. He was fool enough not to know what that meant. He expressed surprise, in a casual way, at her negligence.

"I could not help it," she said, after a pause in which her lip recovered its firmness. "I was watched too closely. I could get nothing to pack anything in."

"Do you never travel, then?" asked he, moved to some kind of interest.

"Never. They have kept me tied up there always." She had regained control of herself fully by now, and faced him swiftly. "Always!" she repeated. "Think of what that means! No change, no friends, no occupation, no amusement. Only my step-mother's eyes fixed on me whenever I looked up—criticizing, blaming, correcting me. And my father's incessant reasonings and reductions of everything to the Inevitable Source, and his stern displeasure if I failed to follow his arguments—the pitiful humiliations he inflicted on me for my inattention, his—oh, you don't know my father!"

"I know a little of him," said Demas incautiously. Here, at least, he could meet her on common ground.

"And the silence and coldness of it all!" cried the girl. "Often my heart ached so that I had to ride away upon Sweetwilliam anywhere, anywhere, or I think I should have gone out of my mind. Did you ever know anything like that?"

"Often," said Demas, forgetful again. In spite of his antagonism, he found himself responsive in some degree to the girl's talk; receptive, if not acutely sympathetic.

Bathia regarded him with wondering eyes.

"You?" she said. "I thought you lived a gay life, with plenty of amusements and many friends."

He corrected his mistake hastily.

"I am speaking of my life when I was a good deal younger than I am now," said he. "Naturally, it has been different of late."

"And it is going to be different for me!" exclaimed the girl. "That's the amazing wonder of it!"

"We had better press on," said he.

Silence once more fell between them. But Bathia, now that a little confidence, on her side at least, had been established between them, walked more lightly and felt her drooping spirits rise somewhat. As for Demas, he was still endeavouring to adjust his perceptions to an unfamiliar state of things. A young man's natural selfishness, combined with the peculiar circumstances of his individual life and temperament, had inclined him to the belief that he was the most unfortunately situated being in the world. Blame her for her grasping ambition as he might—and he was careful to remind himself repeatedly of that—certainly Bathia Loveridge's life, if correctly set forth by her, must hitherto have been a singularly miserable one.

The roadway was still empty when they reached it. Demas roused himself to explain part of his plans.

"I have ordered a postchaise at the inn," he said. "You will hardly care, I suppose, to accompany me there. If you will walk on a little way, I will go and fetch the carriage, and will take you up in a few minutes."

"I will do just what you think best," she answered. Then, as their eyes met in the act of parting—"Am I not already an obedient wife?" said she. Said it with a little fascinating flush of modesty and pride that would have bewitched anew the heart of any ordinary lover. Demas Chaldecott walked away frowning and very thoughtful.

His departure from the place being a thing already anticipated and discussed, there had been no special comment aroused by his preparations. The chaise was in the yard, and the horses were being led out of the stable when he arrived at the inn. His belongings had been placed ready to hand at the open doorway. Matt Vidler himself came out to exchange a few words with him.

"So thee's off, schoolmaster, eh? Well, well, 'twa'n't to be thought as ye'd bide along o' we for ever. A young man of your parts'll be wanten to see things; 'tis natur', an' only to be looked for in youth."

"Bring the things along," said Demas sharply. "How slow your people are to-day!"

"Why, you see, Mr. Chaldecott, sir, we've a-been the least mossel a-put out to marnen. Maybe ye've not heard nothen?"

Demas caught up a bag and strode off to the yard.

"What?" he asked. "I'm straight from the schoolhouse. I've heard nothing at all."

"'Tis about Miss Bathia, sir."

"What of her?"

"She've—whew!—she've a-bolted! Leastways, she—can't—be found."

"Indeed! Who told you that?"

They had reached the yard by now, and the landlord dumped a box of books down before replying.

"'Twas Jeremiah Puddy came tearen downalong not half a nour ago, wi' the noos. It do seem as my young lady hev got clean away out o' her chaumber, an' not a sign nor yet a token to say as how 'twere done. They do say as she took it most tar'ble to heart when Squire sold her harse, and Jeremiah, he do say an' 'firm as he do hold as she've a-gone an' drownded herself. Plase God, it ben't trew! Squire hev a-gone out to searchy, they say."

"Jeremiah always does believe the worst thing!" cried Demas, eyeing the operations in the yard with extreme impatience. "For God's sake, man, look alive with those packages, or I'll never catch the coach at Poole."

"Why, sir, I'm sure I'm so sprack as I can be," remonstrated the other, and moved off, heavy-footed, to fetch the rest of the baggage.

Now, for the first time, a little natural feeling for the adventure warmed the young man's blood.

As soon as possible he sprang into the carriage, and was driven out of the yard. Once fairly away from the inn, he looked out and gave the necessary directions to the boy. Five minutes later the chaise was stopped by the side of the waiting Bathia. Her face lit up as she met his eyes once more.

"Your absence has been discovered," he told her when they were fairly on the road. And he repeated what he had learnt at the inn. Bathia showed no surprise and but little alarm.

"Can he—my father—take me away from you?" she asked. "Surely not."

"No," said Demas. ". . . No. Not now. My claim upon you is greater than his; or any man's."

"Thank heaven!"

"Why do you say that?"

"Because of what I have told you. Because of my unhappiness at home."

"How do you know that you are going to be happier with me?"

"I could hardly be more unhappy," she answered at once. Then, in the gloom of the chaise, he saw again the soft colour sweep across her cheek. The next thing he knew was that her hand had slipped into his.

"I think I shall like you—Felix," he heard her say. "I like you already much better than your brother. You have such kind eyes."

He gave her the full benefit of them as he echoed her praise in a tone of the utmost amazement.

"Kind eyes!"

"They are beautiful!—more beautiful than I thought, now you look so. Oh, I am sure that——"

He turned away, at the same time withdrawing his hand from hers.

"Foolishness!" he said, trying to speak roughly. "My eyes are the same as other men's."

They were driven half a mile in silence. Then Bathia spoke again.

"Felix——"

"Yes?"

"You have been very good to me already. You're not sorry that you've married me, are you?"

Demas stared out of the window at the swiftly passing landscape of leafless trees backed by grey skies. He gnawed his lip in silence. Bathia's question, be it sheer coquetry or genuine frankness, was, in effect, the verbal expression of what, for the last half-mile, had been running through his own mind, like the insistent whisper of a demonical sprite. When he replied at last, he was answering himself rather than her.

"It would be early days for repentance," he said with unnatural vehemence. "Why should I regret what I have done?"

But though the girl was apparently satisfied, Demas had not exorcised his own demon, and the question continued to formulate itself whenever silence fell between them.

"Of course," he added presently, more for the sake of distracting his own thoughts than because he wished to follow the conversation on her lines, "—of course we can't pretend that the marriage is an ordinary one."

"Oh, no," said Bathia faintly.

"And so you can't expect me to make love to you, or anything of that sort."

"I don't," said she with a tinge of disappointment in her voice, for a sensitive ear.

"Just so. The whole affair is a purely business arrangement," argued he. "We shall be wise to keep it so."

"Of course." But Bathia agreed in no very convinced tone.

"You've married me," Demas went on, "for your own convenience. I've married you because it suited me to do so."

"You make it seem rather—hateful," said she.

" 'Tis the fact," he replied coldly. " Take you own case. You wanted to marry a Peverell. 'Tis a noble family, with an earl at the head of our branch of it. You wanted to gratify what I suppose is an ordinary ambition in a woman —to be the wife of a man of family and position, with possible expectations at no far date. To get all that, you were willing to leave your home with a stranger, and to barter your accomplishments on a public racecourse."

" No, no—no, no ! " She was putting out expostulating hands. " No, indeed, you are wrong; all wrong. I am not mercenary like that. As for the riding, you want me to ride, don't you ? "

" Oh, there's no doubt about that. You will have to ride," said he.

" Still, you say I wanted to marry you because—— "

" Because I am Felix Peverell ! If I had been a poor man, without position or connections—who could promise you neither wealth nor amusement, you wouldn't have wanted me, would you ? "

Bathia drew away from him.

" I don't understand you," she said less warmly. " I thought you meant to be kind. Now you are hurting me very much."

They were well away from the district so wearisomely familiar to both of them, and had come down upon the long coast road that ran into Poole. A barren country of sand hills lay around them, and, though an attempt was being made to construct a watering-place in such unpromising surroundings, as yet the houses were too sparse to form more than a scattered community. Now and again, from a stretch of rising ground, they could catch a glimpse on the left of the dark grey streak that was the sea. Overhead, the skies had massed still more heavily together, and were sending down a little fine rain. At a short distance, outstanding objects became blurred and whitened as the mists from the Channel formed slowly about them.

Demas, staring out at the unlovely landscape, grew aware by degrees of an easy pressure against his shoulder. So gently had it been assumed that when he first became conscious of it he realized that it had existed for several minutes. He refused to turn his head, yet he sat still enough, and the weight increased. Soon a soft oral sound rose up against his ear, and despite his mood drew his eyes in its direction.

Bathia's head was resting against his shoulder, with one fair cheek turned upwards to his gaze. She was fast asleep, and breathing like a child. A jerk of his arm would have awakened her. A harsh word would have startled her out of the posture. By all the tenets of his newly-formed creed he should either have moved or have spoken. But he sat very still and almost held his breath in his watching.

The grey light slanted in upon her face, and revealed it a little wanly, yet could not altogether blemish the cream-and-pink of her natural complexion. The brows were well arched and delicate, the parted lips finely shaped and of an alluring ruddiness. Beneath the edge of her bonnet he could see the loose strands of her hair, bright and glossy as a chestnut newly slipped from its husk, vibrating to her own breathing. The long lashes lay slightly quivering upon the white skin, and he could fancy that the blue eyes hidden behind were full of unshed tears.

So, as the chaise rolled nearer and nearer to the end of the first stage, he looked and thought and wondered.

And this was she; the girl who had been tossed so lightly into his arms; the despised of Felix Peverell; the woman whom he himself had cursed so bitterly; the wife whose spirit he had sworn to bend to his own will. This indeed was she.

And what if the story as she had declared it was the truth, and his own belief, with the additional colouring lent to it by Peverell's peevish prejudice, no more than wholesale perversion of the facts? Already he had accepted her statement as to the frustrated apology to himself; and at least he had listened to her account of that morning with shame.

She had drawn off her gloves, and glancing down he saw the ring, his mother's wedding-ring, shining on her finger. The sight aroused other thoughts, and not without relief he let his mind drift off to the memories of his own early days.

And then a strange throb of understanding came to him, and he honestly admitted that the pressure of the drooping girl against his shoulder was neither an encumbrance nor an inconvenience, but had given him an odd and until this moment an unreasonable, feeling of pleasure. And now he knew why. It was because, for the first time in his lonely life, a warm breathing creature had come to his side seeking support in a moment of physical need.

That the protection had been claimed involuntarily, and under a tragical misapprehension, mattered little to him in his present mood. By that simple act of hers, she had given him a new sense of manhood, and, in the realization of it, much of his selfishness unconsciously fell from him. Forces, hitherto latent, sprang up within him, coloured by the passionate ardour which characterized all his emotions, and the vanity which, not without an underlying pathos—so useless and unwanted a thing had he hitherto imagined himself to be—had been the first emotion to respond to Bathia's unconscious appeal, now became swallowed up in a stronger and finer sentiment.

He began to ask himself—what was this that he had done?

To that point he must needs have come sooner or later; for Parson Willavize had judged him truly when he had declared, in the watches of the night, that Demas Chaldecott had imagined such a device as he would not be able to perform. That the fact had established itself thus early hinged merely on a temperamental and a physical point; acting in conjunction; the solitariness of a young man's life; and the weariness of a worn-out girl. . . .

It fell to his part to arouse her, after all his care. He did so gently enough, but the moment of her awakening held embarrassment for both of them. Bathia sat up, withdrawing quickly from the intimacy of his shoulder. She felt as though she had suffered herself to be embraced by a stranger. Demas, striving with his newly-formed doubts and perplexities, withheld his eyes lest she should read already what he must tell and was loth to let her know.

"We are in Poole," he said.

It was a fact that the chaise had already drawn up before one of the many inns of varied nomenclature that faced the waterside. Demas opened the door and stepped out. The quay was almost deserted, and the few vessels that lay alongside showed no signs of life. For an eloping couple the situation was perfect in its retirement, and Demas, who had planned to wait here until the London coach, which was timed to pass in a bare hour, should stop at a more imposing inn in the High Street, had selected it as the first humiliation for his bride, on the wilful assumption that, being good enough for himself, it must be good enough for her also.

In his self-absorption in the chaise, he had forgotten their destination. Now as he regarded the unpretentious place, with its salty atmosphere and suggestion of fo'castle life, rough oaths and indecent ditties, he regretted his choice and was ashamed of his reason. With an odd diffidence he turned back to Bathia, and found that she had shaken the sleep from her eyes, and was putting the stray ringlets into their place. While he looked, she rose and prepared to alight.

"I was thinking that you might not care to stay here," he said. "You will find things very roughly served. Shall we drive to a better place?"

"No, no! This will do. I do not care."

She picked up her skirts and followed him across the muddy footway.

Inside, he engaged a private room upstairs and ordered a meal of the best procurable in so humble an ordinary. Bathia accompanied a slatternly woman up the narrow staircase, while Demas went out to instruct the postboy to be ready within the hour to meet the London bound coach.

When he went up to the room above, he found some disorder and much discomfort prevailing there. Some ten minutes had now elapsed since their arrival, so loth had he been to re-join his bride, but preparations for their entertainment had not progressed very far. The table, with its soiled cloth and chipped china, was only partially laid, and a newly-made fire spluttered and smoked beneath a damp chimney. Before it on the hearth knelt Bathia, her cloak and bonnet removed, fanning the feeble flame with her breath.

It was no more than he had ordained that this woman, wife of his, should do for his comfort, yet the sight of her kneeling there, her bright head bent to the menial task, caused him to exclaim aloud.

"Why are you doing that?" he asked.

"The fire won't burn, and there are no bellows," she answered. "And I thought you would be cold."

"Please to get up," he said. And jerked savagely at the bell-rope.

Bathia rose. He motioned her to a chair, and went to stand by the window. It overlooked the quayside. Immediately opposite lay a grimy collier, half-unloaded. Between the tracery of the rigging he could see the grey wash of the sea, driving in before a south-east wind. The rain had ceased, but the sky was not perceptibly lighter, and the mist still hung furtively around distant objects, the coastline to the west being only faintly discernible—a long irregular formation stretching many miles out to sea.

He was roused at last by Bathia's voice, and, turning, found the fire well alight and the table spread. The contrast between this belated comfort and the dreariness of the scene without dragged him back from his meditations so forcibly that he stood looking on without word or movement.

"It is all ready," he heard Bathia say. "I hope they have brought something that you like, Felix."

The name irked him; he could have blamed her for adopting its use. Felix! How utterly incongruous! He was not Felix, the happy one; he was only Demas the apostate, the man who set his hand to the plough and looked back—the man who fell wilfully and hopelessly away from grace. Surely, as Lord Maumbury had said, he was well-named indeed.

"Come!" urged Bathia.

He took a step forward. Then he saw what she had done. The food was not choice—a salted tongue, a home-made loaf, and the remains of a cold joint made up the solid fare, to which was added the essentials of a homely tea-table. Bathia had served the meal already, reserving the best of it for him.

The knowledge troubled him. Until that moment he could have fallen to with a healthy young appetite. Now he had no desire to accept her service. He turned away with what seemed a moody ungraciousness, and bade her take her meal alone.

He resumed his idle staring from the window. Little sounds came to him from the room behind his shoulder. A cup or knife rattled, her chair creaked, a cinder fell from the fire. A purring liquid sound broke the silence. Then he heard her chair pushed back, and her step on the floor. A touch on his arm; she was at his side.

He turned.

She held out a cup of tea, with a little plaintive smile.

"Do take it," she urged. "It is very good. Take it, Felix."

Their eyes met.

"Don't call me that!" he cried impulsively. "For God's sake, not that!"

"Why not?" she demanded with startled eyes.

The cup and saucer rattled in her hand.

"Why not?" she repeated slowly.

"Because—God help you!—" he told her with a passion of truth in his voice, "it is not my name."

The cup and saucer fell with a crash to the floor.

II

THE OUTCAST BRIDE

The fire was blazing brightly now, and Bathia sat staring into it. There was a redness on her cheek not due to the reflection of the flame. She sat very still and very silent. For the last quarter of an hour she had not spoken.

Yet the time was rich in development, for those brief fifteen minutes separated the girl from the woman. She had stolen away from her father's house with an innocent confidence in the wisdom of her act, since she had carried a child-like faith in the man to whom that act was committed. Now that on his own declaration he had betrayed that trust, the knowledge had brought with it a sense of isolation akin to despair. More than ever did it seem, in the irony of things, that she needed an adviser, a protector, a shaper of her destiny—and who was there to turn to? In her present bewilderment self-reliance was still a thing to desire and aim at, rather than a quality already possessed.

At the window stood Demas, equally still, equally silent. He had, in his confession, spared neither her nor himself anything. He had told her of his shameful flogging, and still more shameful scheme of vengeance; of Gervis Peverell's lie; of Felix Peverell's open contempt; and of his own unscrupulous use of it—and the story, as he heard it from his own lips, was not a pretty one.

There remained only his manner of telling it, and here it was essentially redeemed by his avoidance of excuse and lack of such elaboration as might have insidiously suggested self-palliation. The whole story was bald but convincing and salient. He even refrained from any expressions of contrition, leaving the bare fact of his speaking at all to convey that supreme reality to her. But if she was aware of it she made no sign.

Somewhere in the house a clock struck. Mechanically Demas numbered the strokes, and knew that the London coach must be on the point of leaving the town. Down below the hired chaise was still waiting in the rain.

At the sound of the clock Bathia shivered and sat up. She had been crouching forward, her chin in her left hand, her elbow on her knee. The change of posture sent a little glitter into her eyes. The firelight had thrown into them the shimmer of her wedding-ring. Seeing which, she shivered again, and spoke. But she did not turn her head to look at him.

"Am I really your wife?" she asked.

Demas was thrilled with a sense of surprise at the sound of her voice. It seemed to have lost all its rich cadences, its sweet modulations that could so easily be imagined as trembling into tenderness. It was cold, expressionless, and a little hard. Yet steadier than he had expected; even firmer than his own.

"Before God and man, madam," he said, "you are."

There was another pause. Bathia rose to her feet. As if obeying a signal, Demas moved forward.

"The fact," he said, "is one which I shall endeavour to make as little—irksome as possible."

She flashed a look at him. Her spirit was rising.

"Please explain," she said.

"I hoped you would understand," he answered, "that I make no claim upon you such as I intended at first."

It was a poor reply, and as tactless as it was meant to be reassuring. The bright spot in Bathia's cheek was dyed to a deeper rose.

"I see," she said. "Since you have deceived me so shamelessly you are considerate enough now not to desire to—break my spirit; or is it my heart, sir?"

"You have a right to reproach me," he said. "But at present there are other things to think of."

"Oh, plenty!" she agreed. "Yes; I believe you have given me enough to think of for the rest of my life."

Demas looked gloomily at her flushed face. It was the inviolability of the ill-formed tie which had already impressed itself most strongly upon him.

"Perhaps that is true," he said. "Still, we must decide what is to be done in the present."

"Yes."

The admission fell from her a little weakly. It was born of that sense of helplessness which momentarily she had forgotten.

"There is only one thing for me to do, that I can see," said Demas. "But perhaps you can suggest something else."

"And what is your one thing?" she asked.

She had seated herself again before the fire. Demas stood looking down at her. A curve of her cheek, a white brow, the long lashes and her hair, bright where the firelight touched it, dark in the shadows behind. No more. Yet enough to move him strangely; to set his fancy fleeting back to those few far-off impossible moments when so much beauty had laid itself with such perfect trust almost within his arms.

Her impatient repetition of her question brought him back to the present need.

"I must take you to your home," he said.

He saw her wince at the words. The glance which she threw swiftly upward had repugnance, even fear, in it. The man who had brought her to this was stirred to fresh pity.

"I can't go home," she murmured. And, "I dare not."

"Then I will take you wherever you wish to go," said he.

"But I have nowhere to go," she answered.

"Surely there is some place——" Demas began. She shook her head.

"None."

"No friends?"

"No friend at all. Not one."

"Good God!" said Demas, and fell to walking about the room. Presently he stopped in front of her, and spoke with a diffidence that sat very oddly upon his natural impetuosity.

"I could promise you protection and comfort in the house of a friend of mine," he said. "One whom you may trust. The parson whom you have already met, in fact."

Bathia was not slow to reply.

"He?" she cried vehemently. "Your fellow-rogue? The man who helped you to deceive me? Never! I'll beg in the road first!"

He had not expected her to accept his suggestion, and since she apparently had none to make, he was thrown back upon his original plan. For one despairing moment he thought of Lord Maumbury, but Bathia vetoed that suggestion before it was made, by saying, in that new hard voice of hers:

"I will not go to any friend of yours."

"Then," said he, "I am afraid that I have nothing else to offer you. You must return to your home."

The only alternative was one so impossible that neither of the luckless pair considered it for a moment. Both, from the first, had taken it for granted that immediate separation was agreed upon on either side.

Bathia sat still for a long time. The price of her folly weighed heavily upon her.

"Yes," she breathed at length; "yes, I suppose I must go back."

"You can have nothing to fear," said Demas to comfort her. "Your father, whatever else he is, is a just man——"

Bathia looked up, and he caught back his words quickly. Both had remembered the episode at the yew tree.

"At least," said Demas with a forced kind of candour, "he believed that I had lied about you."

Colour sprang into her cheek. She met his gaze with wondering concern.

"And so you had!" she cried. "I knew nothing of the wretched affair until the Peverells had gone too far to draw back. My consent was not asked—so poor and cheap a thing did they deem me! It was not until I found how much hung on it for them, that I agreed to do it, if only—if only . . . and now I must go back to it all!"

She covered her face with her hands and shrank down in her seat like an abject and broken thing. Seeing her so, a wave of anger shook Demas's soul—anger all the more violent because part of it was directed against himself.

" You shall not ride ! " cried he. " You shall not risk your life for the sake of a hundred dissolute Peverells ! It is the only obedience I claim of you; and, by God, neither pledge nor oath nor threats can turn me from this ! "

" Ride ? " repeated Bathia. " I ride ? To please a man who has brought me—to this ? I don't see what it has to do with you; but you may spare yourself your pains, sir. I do not intend to ride."

" Thank God ! " said Demas. Then he kicked savagely at the fire, and muttered beneath his breath—" Damn them, damn them both ! "

Bathia roused him by rising from her chair, and moving wearily towards the sofa, where her bonnet and cloak were lying. When he would have helped her with them, she waved him off with a new imperiousness before which he fell back abashed and silent.

" I am going home," she said when her shaking fingers had tied the strings and clasped the buckles at her throat.

" We will go at once," said he.

" You need not come."

" I cannot let you return alone. I must explain—confess, if you prefer it—to your father."

She regarded him with a slow kind of wonder. Her misery made her ungenerous.

" My father ? He will probably have you flogged again."

" Probably," assented Demas. " It has left off raining. We can be back in Kinson long before dusk."

" And he won't spare you this time," she added.

" I should hardly expect him to. Are you quite ready, madam ? "

A genuine curiosity brightened her eyes. She was not moved in any degree; his perfect address, his good looks, even his unconscious humility, were all hateful to her. But his apparent indifference to the personal consequences of his act compelled a little cold wonder.

" You really mean to come with me ? " she asked.

" I do."

He rang the bell, settled the bill, and arranged for his belongings to be left at the inn until he should claim them. For himself, beyond the rest of this day's work, he had no plan.

So little had changed, either in the weather or the surroundings, when once more they stood side by side on the slippery footway, that Bathia wondered why the power of the reversion of time had been denied to human beings, until she realized that, even at the moment of entering the inn, the harm had already been wrought. Thereafter there was nothing else to do but to contrast, with a sick sense of futility, her present misery with the hopeful confidence of an hour ago.

As for Demas, he concealed all his thoughts beneath a quiet exterior, but they were none the more restful for that. He remembered, on that return journey, Parson Willavize's words that it would probably be a woman who would discipline him in life's school, and he wondered, as he looked at this white-faced slip of a girl, whether the training had already begun.

Not a word passed between them while they were on the road.

Bathia kept her face towards the window, and never acknowledged his presence by so much as a glance. Nothing external drew the attention of either until at length their vehicle was moving again along familiar ground. Then, happening to look out, Demas saw a carriage of some pretension driving some half-mile ahead of them.

Since the road was a highway, linking the coast to the inland Dorsetshire towns, there would have been no special reason for his remarking the fact, had it not chanced that as he looked a head appeared at the window of the other carriage, and seemed to gaze back at him. Even so, the matter was sufficiently unimportant to slip out of his mind until, on reaching *The Horse and Jockey*, he found that the strange equipage—it was a private coach drawn by a pair of magnificent bays—had come to a halt before the inn.

Bathia gave a little sobbing gasp. She was thinking of her own lost steed; and of the hope which she had had that her husband would buy it back for her. But when Demas turned at the sound, she forbade any inquiry by a gesture and an averted face. He checked his question and they went on as before.

At the corner of the lane he stopped the chaise, and held the door open for her to alight. She did so with a flaming cheek, since the spot inevitably recalled both her interview with Gervis Peverell and with himself. Demas paid the postboy and dismissed him, with scarcely a thought as to his own probable needs, and walked, a few paces behind the girl, between the wintry hedgerows of the lane. Though the afternoon was not far advanced, the gloom of an early twilight was already beginning to fall.

Silent still, they entered the garden before the house, and stood side by side at the door.

It was opened by the grave-faced manservant who had admitted Gervis Peverell to the initial interview of this affair.

Bathia sprang forward, then fell back faltering. For the man was blocking the way, and did not move.

" My father ! " she stammered.

" The master has given orders, miss, that you are not to be admitted."

" Oh ! " she gasped piteously. " Oh, surely not ! "

" You go beyond your duty," said Demas, who had no more expected this than had she. " Please allow Miss Loveridge to pass."

" I can't do that, sir. Orders were most particular that on no account was she to be let in."

" Whose orders ? "

" As I said. The master's, sir."

" But why ? " cried the distressed Bathia. " Why may I not come in ? "

The man hesitated.

" Go on," said Demas sternly.

" Well, sir, not to hurt the young lady's feelings, he said as having left of her own ch'ice, she wasn't to come back of the same."

" I see," said Demas, while Bathia leant against the doorpost and sobbed helplessly. " But your master does not understand the circumstances. He cannot refuse to hear the explanation. Please tell him that his daughter is here."

" No, sir."

" Then allow me to come in and see the squire for myself."

" I dursn't do that either, sir. Neither her nor message from her; those was my orders."

" You fool ! " cried Demas. " Can't a lady leave home for an hour or two without all this trouble on her return ? "

The man stroked his chin.

" Well, you see," he objected, " Miss Bathia's going wa'n't altogether in the ordinary way. Young ladies don't as a rule go for walks down ladders—and a ladder it must have been—nor yet come back along of strange young gentlemen without there's a good reason," he said.

" No, you damned fool," exclaimed Demas between his teeth, " —no, they don't. That's just what she wishes to explain to her father. And if you don't go to fetch him at once, you'll feel the weight of my fist—mark that! Now will you go?"

Before the flushed and determined young face the man drew back, hesitating. But even as he half-turned to depart his services were rendered unnecessary. For, on a sudden, a feminine voice struck across his shoulder in a shrill scream.

"Heavens above!" it cried. "She's come back! The audacious hussy! Loveridge, do you hear?—she's actually dared to come back!"

At the sound of the voice the servant hastily withdrew, and Demas stepped forward to encounter the newcomer. But Bathia was already stretching out entreating arms to her stepmother.

"Let me come in! Oh, for God's sake, let me come in!" she beseeched with tears.

The lady came down to the threshold, and pushed the advancing girl back.

"I marvel that you dare to ask it," she said, "the wicked, wicked creature that you are."

"But what have I done?" cried Bathia in keen distress.

Her stepmother threw an epithet at her. Her manner of doing so brought the blood to Bathia's cheek, though the word was a Scriptural one which in a secular sense the girl had never heard before. Demas caught the woman's arm, his eyes ablaze with fury.

"That's a foul lie, madam!" he cried. "She left her home for an honourable marriage."

Mrs. Loveridge looked at him without interest.

"Pray remove your hand, sir," was all she said.

"Did you hear me?" he asked.

"Indeed I can hear you very well," replied she. "You are positively bawling in my ears. Well, sir—if she went away to get married, why didn't she do it?"

"I am married," cried Bathia, and held out her ringed finger, in her innocence, as a proof.

Mrs. Loveridge smiled coldly.

"A ring is easily put on," she remarked. "If it is as you say, where is your husband?"

"Here," said Bathia faintly, and not looking at the man she indicated.

"We were married this morning," said Demas with the shame of the thing hot upon him.

"Then why, in heaven's name, sir, do you not take your —wife to your home?"

The question was a natural and yet, since it struck at the root of the matter, a searching one. For a moment neither of the two replied. Then Demas said :

"Your daughter wished to return to her father's roof, madam."

Mrs. Loveridge laughed derisively.

"Thank God, she's no daughter of mine!" cried she. "As for wishing to return, that's another story; and I promise you her father'll not take her back."

"Madam, I entreat—I implore your kindness for her! She herself will soon convince you of her blamelessness in the matter."

"I do not desire to hear explanations from either of you," returned the lady. "Pray have the goodness to take your companion away."

Demas swore aloud; Bathia, sobbing, held out her arms.

"I will not stay with him!" she wailed. "And, oh, ma'am, I have nowhere else to go!"

"Pshaw!" said her stepmother, unmoved; "such as you know how to take care of yourselves."

She would have said more, but at that moment a door above was heard to close, and a step descended the stairs. All three waited—with varying emotions; Bathia, in an agony of suspense; Demas, with anticipatory courage; the stepmother, with the assurance of a coming triumph, which she made no attempt to conceal.

The squire came into the hall. At the sight of his runaway daughter and her companion he showed no surprise, and when he spoke, he addressed himself to his wife.

"Who are those persons?" he asked.

"Father!" cried Bathia, and by an adroit movement she slipped past her stepmother, and flung herself on the squire's breast. As a wave breaking on a rock she was immediately thrown backwards.

"Why are you both so cruel to me?" she asked, suddenly standing erect and tearless. "You should pity me, I think."

"Will you allow me to say a word, sir?" asked Demas, schooling himself to civility to his enemy, for the girl's sake, though his heart was throbbing, and his blood on fire.

Loveridge regarded him for a moment. Then he coldly bowed his head.

"Then first, sir, I ask the shelter of your house for this lady, who, unhappily, is now my wife."

A momentary silence alone betrayed the other's amazement.

"Your wife?" he repeated. He turned to his daughter.

"I admit," he said to her, "that I was unprepared for such a disgrace as this."

"D'ye think they are married, Loveridge?" his wife struck in spitefully. She had always nourished an unwarrantable jealousy of the girl. The squire silenced her with a look.

"Do you know who this fellow is?" he then demanded of his daughter.

"I do now," said she, before Demas could reply for her. "I didn't, when I married him."

Mrs. Loveridge threw up her hands.

"La! was there ever such a tale?" cried she.

"'Tis the truth," said Demas. "For I purposely deceived her as to my identity before the marriage. And to end all possible doubt as to our relations, here are the marriage lines, and if further proof is needed, you can examine the register in Parley Church, or apply to the vicar, Mr. Willavize."

He handed a paper to the squire, who perused it with extreme care, and returned it in silence.

"Well?" cried the woman at his side.

"It appears to be in order," replied he. "There is no doubt that she is legally some man's wife. A fact which renders this intrusion all the more inexplicable."

"But," cried the unhappy Bathia, "he has deceived me! I will not stay with him! He has lied to me, and I hate him! And where, where shall I go?"

"Silence!" ordered her father. "And act reasonably. You left my house of your own accord. If you have chosen to unite yourself in wedlock to a low-born adventurer who has already felt my whip across his back—that is your own affair. Go to your husband. Your place is with him; you can claim no protection from me. Even were I desirous of sheltering you, the law would not admit of it. You have disgraced yourself by an irreparable act of folly, and must abide by the result. Please leave my house without delay."

Bathia shrank back, chilled and hopeless. Against his cold sternness there could be, she knew, no final appeal. Looking round as she retreated, she met Demas Chaldecott's eyes—and shrank equally from him. Her stepmother looked on pitilessly.

"Good God!" cried Demas; "do you call yourself a father, and treat your child thus? I only am to blame, and I only deserve your displeasure; inflict it all upon me—punish me how you please, but for the love of justice and humanity——"

The squire held up a steady hand.

"I have heard enough," he said. "No explanation can alter the fact that my daughter has been a fool. There is, to an unbiassed and reasonable mind, only one way of dealing with such. They must taste the consequences of their folly. Moreover, in this case, to folly has been added the crime of ingratitude. She fled from her natural shelter. I decline to receive her back again. As for your share in the business, I am not interested to inquire more closely into it, but I warn you, that unless you are courting a more public humiliation than you received at my hands before, you will do well to leave my premises at once."

Demas looked him fairly in the face before replying. Then, with a scornful gesture, he turned away.

"Your threats, even the execution of them, are little to me now," said he with a fine spirit. "I would bear ten times what you might choose to inflict, if your heart would soften in proportion towards your daughter. I have already cursed you for my own sake. Now, God knows, I curse you still more bitterly—for hers."

He turned his back on the house and walked away. Bathia had disappeared. When he reached the lane, he failed to find her waiting for him there. With increasing apprehension he strode on in the now deepening dusk and came out on to the highroad. Up and down he turned, gazing into the obscurity far and near, seeking to catch a movement close at hand, or the echo of a footstep in the distance. Not a withered leaf stirred, not the rustle of a frightened rabbit broke the silence. In all the dreary expanse of roadway, not a creature was in sight. And when he climbed the banks that bordered it, the only view spread out before him was one of empty fields stretching out to the distant hedgerows. Nor, when his rapid steps had brought him to the inn, did he learn any tidings of her there.

With a new sense of shock, he came outside again, and did a foolish thing. He called her name aloud, repeatedly, imploringly. And the silence which followed upon each wild cry made the next appeal a little more hopeless still.

III

THE PARSON AT HOME

Those who knew him best were in the habit of declaring that it was his natural astuteness which led Parson Willavize to reside where he did. Undoubtedly, the choice had its advantages. For a cleric of convivial tastes and easy-going character it was convenient to dwell outside his diocesan area. On the one hand, no disquieting call to duty was likely to reach himself; while on the other, such reports as were apt to circulate respecting his mode of life could be of no special interest to a community where he was neither master nor servant. Thus, in spite of various innocent irregularities, Evurtius Willavize had hitherto contrived to steer clear of anything like public scandal.

His house was in the adjoining county to the one where he wielded his intermittent authority. It stood within the borders of the ancient seaport of Southampton, and was one of the most picturesque and beautifully situated buildings in the town. It stood in a quiet side street not far from the harbour, and at the back looked out over the narrowing arm of the Water itself. It was a fine half-timbered Tudor building, with a tradition of a royal progress to lend dignity to what was already sufficiently interesting. It was said that the Eighth Henry had spent a night within its walls. Whether or no, it remained a pleasing remnant of medievalism amid a great deal of more important antiquity.

It was many-roomed, with heavy oak rafters, a fine stairway, narrow passages, and lofty ceiled apartments, dark with ancient wainscoting and full of slumberous shadows. The largest of these possessed a minstrels' gallery and a richly carved stone fireplace, and it was here that the parson might have been said, when in residence, to make his home. The window looked out on to a garden of great charm, and incidentally commanded a view of the more domestic quarters of the house. Thus it was that the parson, raising his eyes as he sat in the window-seat, was enabled occasionally to see the maid Julia Trickett moving from the kitchen door to the herb-bed or the well.

The garden, which was practically built upon the old town walls, ran out at one point to overhang the waterside, and formed a pleasant corner for the parson's cronies on a summer evening. The rest was stone-paved, with here and there a pathway of grass leading to a sundial or seat of stone. In the season flowers rioted everywhere, for the place was lapped in sunshine from morning till evening. And so secluded was it, although in the heart of a busy town, that the only sound that broke its quietude from without was the soft beating of the tide on the strip of shore beyond.

The house had memories even for the man who spent so small a portion of his time within it—for Evurtius Willavize never let his pleasure-seeking foot remain long in one place. But whatever of serious contemplation of life he had indulged in had either originated or actually been yielded to here.

For fourteen years it had been the home of Demas Chaldecott, though the old-world peace of the place had never satisfied the hot restless blood that was in him. The alternate wide spaces and cramped corners had fired his imagination with a sense of mystery and aroused inarticulate desires, while the dull monotony of a lonely boyhood had failed to induce the habit of commonplace acquiescence. Yet the parson never returned to the quiet Tudor house in the back street without the image and personality of the young Demas recurring forcibly to his mind.

It was here that the final adoption of the boy, under the patronage of Lord Maumbury, had been decided upon after a long talk between the two, held in the room which overlooked the garden. And, later, during the lad's absence at school, Julia Trickett had been rescued from the crude shelter of a charitable establishment in Dorset, and installed as a subordinate member of the household. Thus both boy and girl had spent their years of early development beneath the parson's eye, and that indulgent organ had watched each with an individual interest differing in scope and quality.

At the age of twenty Demas had been sent out at the end of Lord Maumbury's leading-string to earn his living in the only way which in any sort united the wishes of himself, his patron, and the parson. Of the three, Demas was probably the least satisfied. But he contrived to remain in no employment for less than three months, until at length a violent altercation between himself and the authorities at one village had ended in his being packed off by Willavize to his own parish of Parley, under the mistaken impression—unpardonable, as the parson now saw, in a man of the world—that it would be impossible for him to get into any mischief there.

It was of that mischief, at which he himself had been forced to connive, that Evurtius Willavize was thinking, a week or so after the event. Since he had parted from the newly married couple in the churchyard, he had heard nothing from Demas, nor any word of the way in which Bathia Loveridge's flight had been received by her own people. A rumour had reached him that Gervis Peverell was still at Dorchester, and he had received a letter from Lord Maumbury. But that missive, so far from imparting information, asked for such—asked, moreover, with a querulousness that struck a new note in their correspondence.

Demas, it appeared, had neglected to reply to a long letter of counsel and friendly exhortation which his lordship had sent. The parson grimaced humorously over the complaint, but graver matter followed. Would he make it his business to see the young man, or even to bring him to Dorchester again, in order that the wishes which the writer had already expressed might be set forth with greater force? Lord Maumbury, with a pious resignation, declared that he felt his end approaching, and therefore begged, with an almost pathetic insistence, for aid in the carrying out of his desires.

"The man's mad!" muttered the parson, slapping the letter down with every sign of impatience. "His damned new-fangled religion has turned his brain."

But in a while a gentler look softened his face, and he sat idly tapping the letter with his forefinger while he gazed through the window into the garden beyond. After all, the man was nearing his end. There was no doubt about that. The parson had seen the unmistakable signs for himself less than a fortnight ago. . . .

Presently his ruminations were broken in upon by a deferential knock at the door. He hurriedly thrust the letter away, brought his easy attitude into a more decorous one, and cried, "Come in."

In response, Julia Trickett entered giggling, with a kitten in her arms. She was a pretty young woman, rosy and well-formed, lively in manner, good-tempered, and of a countrified freshness. The parson's face relaxed at sight of her.

"Well?" he said; "well, Julia?"

"Good morning, sir."

So plump and blooming was she that, to his sophisticated mind, she represented all the charm of wild untaught things. On her first coming to the shelter of his roof he had told himself that here was a fresh unspoiled young creature to be trained for his own tastes. Her very name had promised great things. He had even written verses on her, which no one had ever seen.

But Julia Trickett had proved less malleable than was convenient for his plans. And this, not on account of her hardness, but of her softness. In truth, she far less resembled the heroine of Herrick's ditties than did Parson Willavize the poet himself. It was a fact that she did none of the dainty things presumably attributable to her namesake.

The wearing of scarlet ribbons in church was the most hopeful thing she had done yet. True, she was an adept in the culinary regions. But a lyric "*To Julia, frying Bacon,*" lacked seductiveness. Yet she looked pretty enough doing it, as the parson had often reflected when smoking his early morning pipe near the kitchen door. The earnestness of her face as she watched the delicate fat turning from opaque to transparent and back again to opaque, left nothing to be desired. But poetic fancy fled from the commonplace prose of the action, and declared that it only suited Julia because Julia suited it.

Amenable to a degree, the girl honestly strove to adapt herself to her master's notions, but beyond a certain point she was incapable of going. Had it been otherwise, the parson, months ago, would have freed himself from Mrs. Virgin's unvirginal assault upon his bachelorhood, and have taken the charming Julia to wife. As it was, she merely represented in a concrete form his opposition to the Earl of Maumbury's matrimonial plans for Demas Chaldecott, and his reason for yielding to those of Demas himself.

When Julia came into the room and stood dimpling and simpering before him, he felt almost reconciled to the heartless trick which he had allowed to be played upon a deeper-emotioned woman.

"Well, Julia, and how have you got on with the cat—— "

Julia's eagerness to reply promptly often led her to interrupt.

"Oh, he's a dear!" she cried, tickling the kitten's ear. "And he don't scratch near so much as he did."

"——the catechism," finished the parson gravely.

"Oh, that, sir. I've learnt down to my duty towards my neighbour, sir."

"And what is it, eh?"

Julia repeated the words parrotwise.

"Very good. Yes." The parson fell into thought. "And are you contented with the sphere in which you find yourself?"

"Oh, la, yes, to be sure, sir. I love being here."

"Not wishful for anything else, I hope? Not hankering after a position that wouldn't become you in the least?"

"Indeed, no, sir."

The parson breathed in content with her words. He had wondered at times whether he had wronged the girl by not allowing her to make the match which would have raised her social status.

"I'm glad to hear it," he said. "Remember, Julia, nothing enervates the moral character like unlawful ambition. It engenders discontent and saps the true energy of the mind."

"Yes, sir, I'll be sure to remember that," said the girl, rubbing the kitten's nose the while. Whereupon the parson fell to rubbing his own, smiling behind his broad palm, as he always did when he tempted Julia into pretty affectations by purposely talking over her head.

"And have you learnt the verses?" he asked then.

"Oh, yes, sir."

"Repeat them, please. The hymn first, I think."

Julia had no elocutionary gift. Her recitation of verse was worse than her repetition of the catechism. She gabbled off the lines at full speed:

"Teach me to feel another's woe
To hide the fault I see
The mercy I to others show
That mercy show to me."

"Very good; very good indeed," approved the listener. "Do you know what it means?"

Julia, poised on one dainty foot, reflected awhile.

"It means," she said at length, "that I'm to be sorry when Mrs. Virgin has got the toothache; not to tell her when I've forgotten to dust the parlour or fetch the wood; and that the Lord'll serve me as I serve others."

"Ah, Julia, that's excellent!" cried the parson. "Extremely perceptive, that last. And talking of lords," he continued with no sense of irreverence, "how would you like to see a real live one?"

"Oh, my goodness," cried Julia, dropping the kitten to clasp her hands. "I'd be frightened to death! A real live lord, sir?"

"Quite real, but not very much alive. In fact, poor fellow, so extremely moribund that if you don't see him soon you never will at all."

And with an expression of genuine regret the parson found Lord Maumbury's letter, and read the end of it again.

It contained a request, made with the subdued passionateness that characterized all the earl's appeals, that Willavize would present the girl Julia Trickett to him at some early date. The parson had lingered long over the paragraph, weighing what he suspected was the underlying motive, against the possible advantage to the girl herself.

Since any benefit accruing to a marriage with Demas Chaldecott was now out of the question, it was not improbable that the earl might endeavour to make up the loss in some more material way. A sight of the girl, fresh, innocent, and wholly unshadowed by the tragedy that had robbed her of her father, could hardly fail to arouse the sympathy of one benevolently minded.

With all his robustness, there was a certain flabbiness about Evurtius Willavize, which led him into compromises, procrastinations, and similar weaknesses. He put the letter away again. After all, there was no need to decide off-hand. My lord was not dying yet. And perhaps the matter of Demas's marriage ought to be broken to him first. With a sense of relief at having shelved a responsibility Parson Willavize turned back to the waiting Julia.

"Well, well," said he easily, "some day you shall. But don't let the thought of such gaieties turn your head, my girl."

"I won't, indeed," she declared, and laid her hand in the broad palm he was holding out to her. He gave her fingers a little squeeze, and was still holding them—in rather too warm a clasp for the relation of mere master and maid—when the front door knocker was sounded. He dropped her hand at once, and, a little redder in the face than usual, subsided into his lounging attitude once more. Julia, evidently conscious of nothing out of the way, ran off to open the door.

A few moments later the visitor came unannounced into the room. It was Demas.

The parson greeted him cordially, set a chair by the hearth, stirred up the logs, and falling into his old attitude, regarded the young man with some attention. Of the many signs which his shrewd eyes noted he said nothing, preferring to hear whatever there might be to tell, in a natural way.

Demas sat forward, chin in hand, his gaze on the fire.

"So it's you, is it?" observed the elder man, though it seemed a little late for the remark.

"Yes; 'tis I."

"No mistake about that. Well—and where's your wife?"

Demas glanced up for a brief moment.

"The Lord knows!" he said then. "I don't."

The parson stiffened into closer attention.

"You young scoundrel! What have you done with her?"

"I? Nothing. She left me—ran away of her own accord."

The parson looked grave; even a little disappointed.

"I'll alter my question," said he. "I'll ask this: What have you done to her?"

"Done? Told her the truth!" said Demas with a short hard laugh. And resumed his staring into the fire.

"What? Already?"

"Oh, yes; already. A week ago, to be precise. She froze into unfriendliness at once."

"And ran away?"

"And ran away."

"You don't know where?"

"I wish to heaven I did! She simply vanished into the dusk. I've spent the whole time since in looking for her, and not a trace can I discover. I don't know why I came to you; for help, or advice, I suppose."

The parson rose to fetch his long clay pipe from the mantelpiece, and filled it slowly from the jar at its side. This gave him the excuse for a long and narrow scrutiny of the dejected young face near to his own. It was paler than when he had last seen it, heavy-eyed, and a little worn.

"And you're naturally disappointed," he commented, his gaze now fixed on the spill which he was lighting at the flames.

"Well, I didn't expect her to be precisely pleased," said Demas irritably. "She took it much as I thought she would."

"I didn't mean that." The parson's tone was of the silky mildness which he assumed under provocation when he was trying to draw his companion. "Disappointed at the present failure of your scheme, I meant. But weren't you rather a fool to let the truth out so soon?"

"Shouldn't I have been rather a scoundrel if I'd held my tongue?—and she so trusting and innocent!"

"Trusting and innocent? Of course she was, or she'd never have been tricked into marrying you. That can't have come as a surprise. You knew she was that all along."

Demas suddenly flung back his head, and met his friend eye to eye.

"Why did you let me do it?" he demanded passionately.

The parson laughed; a full satisfying laugh, mellow with the knowledge of men and things.

"Hear him, ye gods!" he cried, jerking the stem of his pipe upward. "What an unreasonable young savage it is! My dear Demas, didn't you solemnly swear that nothing could turn you from your purpose?—that if I wouldn't marry you you'd get another parson to do it? Didn't you?"

Demas's passion had died down. He had grown moodily introspective again.

"I suppose so. Yes; I know I did," he answered with his curious readiness to admit a fault once it was inwardly and fully recognized. " But you know that I've always listened to you; even taken your advice. You should have talked me out of it."

" If my memory serves," said the other, " 'twas you who did the talking. However, the things done, and the Church can't undo it. Let's hear the whole story, my lad. I hate hearing a tale in snatches."

Demas told; the plain facts only, leaving the parson to embroider them with emotion at his discretion. When he had ended there came a pause. Then Willavize blew out a blue cloud and laid his pipe down.

" Oh, the women, the damned women, bless 'em ! " observed he. " They were the ruin of your poor father, and it looks as if they were going to be yours as well."

Demas glanced up quickly.

" My poor father ? " said he. " Can you find it in your heart to pity him ? "

" Yes, Demas, I can. Even as I find it in my heart—thank God !—to pity you. Your father sinned and suffered; you've sinned, and unless I'm much mistaken you're going to suffer, too."

" You don't suppose I've been particularly happy all this week, do you, sir ? "

" If I thought that," returned the parson, " I shouldn't be talking to you at my own fireside. But never mind all that. Keep your repentance for the leavening of your own soul. Don't expose it to the light; folks are apt to criticize it if you do. The immediate point is—what do you mean to do ? "

" I must find her," said Demas restlessly.

" Very good. She has, of course, a right to your protection."

" She'll never accept it."

Willavize, as his habit was, slipped past the debatable point.

" The discovery shouldn't be so difficult, after all," he resumed thoughtfully. " She's bound to show herself when the race comes off."

" She's not going to ride," said Demas. " I thought you understood that."

" The devil she isn't ! " cried the other perplexedly. " Refuses, eh ? "

" Yes. And even if she wanted to, I wouldn't allow it."

" You, indeed ! "

Demas reddened, but entered no disclaimer.

"At all events," he reiterated, "she's refused."

"Which rather complicates matters," remarked Willavize.

"Does it?"

"You young fool, yes. Don't you see what you've done? Made enemies of the two Peverells! How are you going to square them for the loss of their bet?"

"I don't know. I hadn't thought of that. My mind's been full of her."

"It's an ugly situation, my boy. You ought to have held your romantic repentance in check until the race was over."

"And have allowed her to risk breaking her neck for a pair of fashionable rakes?" cried Demas. "A pretty scoundrel I'd have been to do that!"

"The great pity is," said this worldly counsellor, who, with it all, had a way of going to the heart of things, "—the great pity is that you ever imagined that you were."

"Have you any other advice for me?" asked Demas a little wearily.

"Yes. This: beware of Gervis Peverell. T'other one, Felix, may forgive you in time. He's got plenty of good points, and there's little real malice in him. But Gervis"—the parson pressed his full lips together, and shook his head—"never in this world! He won't rest until he's got upsides with you. You know the old rhyme—

'Maumbury Rings, Maumbury Rings,
Until blood be spilt the memory clings.'

And the Peverells have their own way of putting it—Blood for a lie, a blow, or a woman. That's the family creed, and the only one Gervis has any reverence for. So I tell you again to take care of him."

"I'm not afraid of any Peverell alive," said Demas. And it was obvious that he meant it.

For some reason or other his companion held out his hand.

"You've a long way yet to go," he said enigmatically. Then he shook his broad shoulders, and got on to more practical ground. "Have you made any plans for yourself?" he asked.

"Not yet."

"Do you need money?"

"I've some left—enough for my wants at present."

"That's well. Of course you know that this absurd marriage of yours has cut you off from my lord and his influence?"

"I meant it to do so."

"I might get you a situation as usher somewhere," began the parson dubiously. But Demas, who did not seem greatly interested, shook his head.

"I've done with the teaching," said he.

"You wouldn't care about the Church, I suppose? There are very comfortable feathers to be picked up in it."

But Demas had refused the choice before. He did so now even more emphatically.

"I don't accept all your dogmas," he said.

"Bless you, neither do I!" chuckled Evurtius Willavize. "But it doesn't hinder me being a damned good parson, does it?"

Demas walked to the window, and stared into the familiar garden. Its summer prettiness had been stolen from it, as sorrow or sickness may ravage a fair face. The stone seats looked chilly and formal, the borders ran wild, the glimpse of water beyond was dull and grey.

"I can stay here for a day or so, I suppose?" the young man asked.

Julia came out to the well. Instantly the parson, who had joined his youthful friend at the window, thought of three excellent reasons why Demas should be induced to take his departure at once.

He was now a married man.

"Can I?" he asked.

He was most confoundedly handsome in face and figure.

"Have you any objection, sir?"

There was a young woman in the house.

"Why don't you answer me?"

He turned, and fixed those eloquent eyes of his on his companion.

The parson sighed.

"As long as you like!" he said.

He laid his arm across the young fellow's shoulders.

"Oh, Demas, Demas," cried he; "a nice problem you've set us both! I wonder what devil's spawn ever induced me to encumber myself with the responsibility of you!"

The mischief of it was that his shrewd and experienced mind suspected troubles which the present did not show. And these intangible spectres are always the most grisly of them all.

IV

RESCUED AND RESCUER

When Bathia fled away from her father's house for the second time in one day, it was with the impulsive instinct of a frightened wild animal. It was only her stepmother who saw her turn in the dusk and flee. And that lady had no desire to bid her stay, or to direct the attention of the two men to the girl's departure. This was effected some few minutes before either of them, absorbed in argument, had knowledge of the fact. So that when Demas Chaldecott reached the gate his runaway wife was already at the end of the lane, and flying from him like a hare.

It was Demas himself from whom she fled. Her father's coldness stunned her, her stepmother's attitude mortified and repelled, but it was the thought of the man whom she must henceforth call her husband that gave such speed to her feet, and roused such a passion of revolt within her heart. The thought of his claim upon her, his power over her, his right to force his undesired protection upon her—from all this she turned and fled, and felt that she must continue to flee although her heart should burst.

She pressed her hands over her straining bosom for a single instant at the end of the lane, turning wild eyes this way and that. Her bewildered brain sought some inspiration as to the wisest direction to take, but before the arguments had arranged themselves with any coherence she heard the distant slamming of the gate, and knew that Demas had started in pursuit.

Terror, unreasoning and blind, seized hold of her. The sound of his footsteps pounding behind her seemed to fill her ears as she ran; but it was only the beating of her own heart and the throbbing of the blood at her temples. She panted, she gasped, she choked, but she went on. Hedges flew past her, the grey shadows turned red, her feet seemed not her own. A warm glowing atmosphere enveloped her as she ran, her loose hair fell about her face, the bonnet strings half-strangled her. Yet withal her limbs were obedient to her desire, and onwards she sped, scarcely touching the ground, through the obscurity and silence of the deepening twilight, until the roadway rose up to meet her and struck her a heavy blow.

She remained where she had fallen for a few minutes, then raised her hand to thrust the hair out of her eyes. There was a deep cut across the palm, and as the smart became more apparent she wondered stupidly what had caused it. She rose to her knees a moment later, and remembrance revived. But with it came a conviction that she had lost the power to outdistance the dread which still pursued her from the shadows behind.

Getting gradually upon her feet she found that to stand alone occupied all her energies, and knew that to continue her escape with the same rapid progress as heretofore was a thing impossible. By degrees she drew to the side of the road, came to a dry bank, and leant against it to think.

All sense of time, distance, almost of situation, had been lost. She found herself still on a highway, between tall hedges of bramble set upon grassy banks. But whether she had come one mile or three was a matter which her bewilderment could not determine. She might have passed the inn, or she might not have reached it; she might be pursuing the road along which she had already travelled twice that day, or she might have left it at some point. The evening was closing in rapidly, hastened on by a mass of rain clouds in the west. The only thing of which Bathia was sure, after a moment's reflection, was that she had not turned, when starting, in the direction of the village of Kinson. She was certain of that, for she remembered noticing the last yellow streaks in the grey sky as she ran.

It was very dim and silent all about her. Apparently, one good assurance was hers. She had thrown off her pursuer. She smiled, half-comforted for her present distress by the thought. But her unstrung nerves were not going to let her off so easily. Had she escaped? she wondered, with fresh trouble. Supposing he was just behind, creeping towards her with those lithe graceful motions of his, nearer and nearer in the darkness, reaching out his masterful hands to claim her, and to drag her into his keeping!

It was neither his blows nor his kisses that she feared, but he himself—the man who had hated and deceived her, who had sworn false vows and used her confidence to trick her into a relationship which had only removed her from her old detested life by placing her in a worse position still. If there was little of her father's logic in her reasoning, there was much of that femininity which he had not succeeded in crushing out of her.

At the thought of her husband's possible proximity Bathia grew faint, so exhausted was she already by the stress of the last two hours and her clumsy fall. Yet she rallied herself to strain forward in the gloom, searching it as well as she could, with hearing on the stretch to catch the most distant sound.

It came at length. A faint *throb, throb,* that her perfervid imagination easily construed into the beating of a man's running feet. She instinctively set her own in motion. But the next moment she was leaning helplessly against the bank, praying passionately that he might pass her in the darkness, and not see. Then she closed her eyes and waited.

The sound increased in volume and complexity, until at length even to the frightened girl's perception it was impossible to attribute it to a pair of human feet. She opened her eyes therefore, and shook herself with a little hysterical laugh. How foolish she had been not to recognize the sound before—she, of all people! It indicated the approach at a steady trot of a pair of horses. True, her husband might be behind them, but at least there would be a driver or postillion, who might be moved to take her part.

Plucking up heart of grace, she forgot her aching head and her wounded hand, and stood erect, her eyes fixed steadfastly upon the two glimmering points of lights which had now emerged out of the distant darkness.

A blinding flash shone into her eyes. The carriage, which seemed to be a large one, was abreast of her. Then came a sudden plunging and rearing of the animal nearest to her, a swaying of the vehicle itself, and loud oaths to the accompaniment of a furious crackling of the whip. One of the horses, startled by the sudden shining of the lamp upon her light-coloured cloak, had shied violently, and for a few moments there seemed much likelihood that the equipage would be upset.

Bathia, braced by the presence of a physical danger, sprang to the animals' heads. Once or twice the whip came down across her shoulders, but the momentary tussle with brute force did her all the good in the world. Her nerves grew taut, her will reasserted itself—here was an element which she could understand. And behind it all was a passionate disregard of her own danger—the natural outcome of her melancholy situation allied to her physical courage.

In three minutes order had been restored. The horses, which Bathia instinctively felt to be magnificent creatures, were standing, trembling but disciplined, between the traces. The carriage held its ground as firm as a rock, and Bathia, relinquishing her grasp on the headstalls, wondered stupidly whether she had helped to save her husband's life. Then a voice—a woman's—struck into the sudden silence.

"Is it all right, Wilkins? What was the matter?"

"Blest if I know, ma'am. 'Twas Nero began it, I b'lieve. Now then, you feller, whoever you are—stand clear! And thanks for your help, sonny."

"Is there someone there?" demanded the traveller sharply.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Then come here—you!"

The imperious order drew Bathia to the coachside. Someone looked out of the window.

"Here's half-a-crown for you," said the voice.

"I don't want that," said Bathia, and the door flew open in her face.

"Good heavens, it's a female!" cried the other woman. And she stepped down into the roadway.

"Beg pardon, ma'am, they'll not stand long," interrupted the driver.

"They must," returned his mistress, and addressed Bathia again. "Did you really help us?" she asked.

"I—I think so," answered the girl. She drew back before the other's advance, and unconsciously revealed her fair and dishevelled person in the light of the carriage lamp. The sight brought a further exclamation of surprise from the stranger.

"Why, you're only a girl; and very pretty at that!" declared she. "And not a common wench at all! What in the world are you doing here at this time of night?"

The truth slipped from Bathia, heedless of the presence of a third person.

"I—I have run away from my husband, madam," faltered she.

The lady laughed. She was Diana Woodland, who had often been tempted to do the same thing.

"Indeed! How courageous of you!" she exclaimed, examining Bathia more attentively. "And where's your lover, child?"

"My—what, madam?"

"Your lover, of course. Where is he?"

"I haven't got one."

"Great heavens! What marvels will happen next? D'you mean to tell me that you've left your husband without having another man to go to?"

Bathia was prevented from confirming this apparently anomalous suggestion by a voice from within the coach, which asked, in half-drunken tones, what they were stopping for.

"Silence, you fool!" cried Diana over her shoulder. "Go to sleep again."

"Sha'n't, my—my beauty," replied her lord. "Wan' to see who—who you're—talkin'—to."

Diana Woodland enriched the night air with a long impatient sigh.

"Tell me," she said, "does your husband drink? Is he a jealous fool, who only loves you in his cups, and not too devotedly then?"

"I don't know," said Bathia, a little amazed at the vehemence of her companion's language. "I haven't been married very long. But I hate him, oh, indeed, I hate him!"

"Dian'!" cried Nicholas Woodland, stumbling out of the carriage towards his wife. "Wha' the devil are we stoppin' for? Who's that you've got there? Ha' ye found him, eh?"

"No," said Diana crisply, at the same time laying her hand on Bathia's arm. "There's no man here at all. Only a girl—the bravest I ever met."

Whether Diana was referring to the courage implied in tackling a pair of spirited horses, or in escaping from an uncongenial spouse, was not apparent.

"A girl, eh? Let's have a look at her! Wha's a girl doin' here in the dimpsy? Up to no good, the hussy. Pack her off, an' let's be getting on."

So spoke Nicholas Woodland, thereby giving the cue for his wife's line of conduct.

"Have you come far?" she asked of Bathia. "Where are you going?"

"Anywhere," replied Bathia with a little shiver, "where he can't find me."

"Are you prepared for a journey?" was the next question. "You don't look as if you are. I mean, have you money, and baggage with you?"

"No—none at all," Bathia confessed with sudden shame.

"So bad as all that?" Diana's interest, if not her sympathy, was stirred. "What a brute you must have left! I asked because I thought you might be waiting for the mail, and, with your face and dress, my child, people at inns will look askance at you, if you haven't all the encumbrances of respectability."

"He, he! She means a husband," Squire Woodland interjected, leering at Bathia in the lamplight. "My beauty calls her husband a—an—encumbrance, he, he!"

"Don't heed—this fool," said Diana with open contempt. Bickerings, even quarrels, between her and the man she had wedded had taken place before servants and strangers so often that she no longer tried to avoid them. "Don't you see what I mean?"

"What shall I do?" asked the shivering girl. "I have nowhere to go, and if I stay here much longer, he will find me, I'm afraid."

"Steady! whoa!" admonished the statuesque driver.

Diana grasped Bathia's arm.

"Come with me," she said.

Bathia hesitated for the fraction of a minute. Not because Squire Woodland, as soon as he heard his wife's proposal, broke out into half-tipsy and wholly insulting protestations against it, but because there was a quality about her new friend which she neither understood nor liked. The light cynicism of her tone, her frankness of speech on the girl's unprotected situation, her almost ostentatious scorn of her husband—all stirred a repugnance that bordered on distrust in Bathia's heart. A day ago she would have felt only the kindness of the offer, have seen only the interest in the beautiful face dimly revealed by the yellow glow. But deceit and betrayal had come to her since the dawning, and suspicion awoke readily.

Yet she was undoubtedly not in a position to be supersensitive. So much her reason told her. And, hungry and jaded as she was, without a coin of any sort, fearful lest her husband should appear out of the darkness to claim her, she found much wisdom in the assurance.

"You are very kind, madam," she said, allowing Diana to lead her forward.

"Nonsense! I am happy to be able to help you," returned the other; and might have added her thankfulness for the chance of thwarting her husband, who was still mumbling objections in the rear. In truth, but for his opposition, implied before actually expressed, Bathia would have been left standing in the roadway, with a few caustic words of advice to her comfort in lieu of practical help.

Unaware of this, the girl stepped into the carriage with a sense of relief, and sank into a corner while Diana reckoned with her husband apart.

"You don't want the horses to bolt, do you?" she asked. "Wilkins says he can't hold them any longer. We can't stay here all night talking. For heaven's sake, get inside."

He yielded rather to her physical impetus than to her verbal persuasions, and a minute later the coach was again in motion.

Nicholas Woodland at once fell asleep. Bathia, aware that something was due to her rescuer, roused herself to address her. Now that the immediate danger of Demas Chaldecott's pursuit was ended, her unstrung nerves steadied themselves, and her brain grew clearer. She spoke the first idle words that came to her.

"You have fine horses, madam," said she, realizing that this must be the equipage which she had noticed before the doors of *The Horse and Jockey* some time earlier.

"Passable," returned Diana Woodland, adding indifferently, "I like good horseflesh."

"Your husband must be an excellent judge," said Bathia.

Diana shrugged her shoulders in the darkness.

"Oh!—he!" she said. "A better judge of brandy, I fancy."

Her mind drifted away to the man whose magnificent gift the horses were, Gervis Peverell. And from him to his brother, who, though the more generous of the two, had given her little of value beyond his kisses, for Felix—poor Felix, she called him to herself, with a half-mocking pity—had already been in the hands of the Jews when she first met him. Yet it was the chance of meeting Felix which had brought her to-day into the district where she supposed him to be. The attendance of her husband was an undesired incident.

Bathia interrupted the tender reverie by asking her name. When told, the information had no significance for the girl. The gossip and scandal of the county had been secluded from her parents' house, and beyond that she had never gone. Then the inevitable counter-question followed.

Bathia had learnt one Christian virtue from her father before she had valued it as part of her professed faith. It was, strangely enough, rather the ancient influence than the more recent one which framed her lips to the reply now. Sophistry might have weakened the believer, but it had no place among the cold clear reasoning of the sterner philosopher. If the God of truth was honoured on this occasion, it was because Timon Loveridge the unbeliever had taught his daughter to speak the truth. Asked by Diana to tell her name, she replied, slurring the word over a little, but speaking without hesitation:

"Chaldecott, madam."

As her questioner had supplied her with the surname only, she added nothing to her own bald acknowledgment.

The same effect followed. To Diana Woodland, the toast of the county, the leader of local society whenever she was able to touch it, the name of an obscure National Schoolmaster was unknown. Not familiar with it as belonging to the gentry or squiry, she concluded that her unhappy companion was married to some churl beneath her own station. Delicacy, aided by want of interest, forbade further questioning. As to the younger woman, she had already determined to reveal nothing of her pitiful story beyond what she had now said. It held too much of shame and humiliation for that.

So these two fair creatures, whose lives had already radiated influence across each other, rode on side by side, and neither knew the other's potential identity.

V

"THE COUNTESS OF MAUMBURY"

DIANA WOODLAND sat alone in the quiet house. The silence was soothing to the rest of the inhabitants after the stormy scene which had ended in the violent departure of the master into the open air. But to Diana, whose nerves were strained by long endurance of such episodes, the sudden cessation of the verbal turmoil acted as an irritant even less bearable than the quarrel itself.

She was not the woman to shed tears over her wrongs and humiliations. Insult braced instead of weakening her; abuse sharpened her wits. The more ignominious the position her husband forced her into, the higher rose her spirit and the more biting became her tongue. Quick retort was the safety-valve which preserved her dignity. When the necessity for it was removed by the withdrawal of Nicholas, her faculties remained clear-cut, her emotions unblurred. Her vigorous intellect merely ran into another groove. Anger might rage in her heart, but Diana of the Woodlands might be trusted not to lose her head.

The silence became a burden, the inaction more wearying than physical motion. Her hands gripped each other tensely; she realized that every month which added to her matrimonial chains was exacting toll of her youth and beauty. The thought filled her with a cold horror. It brought her sharply to her feet, and carried her over to her mirror. The woman who trades upon her superficial qualities is seldom level-headed enough to grasp the meaning of the hissing words *Woman, you will one day be old!* But Diana Woodland had brains as well as beauty, and traded with both.

As yet her face remained fair enough, her eyes undimmed, her hair perfect in its dark lustre. For the present—a year, two years—she was safe. But could she be certain that at the end of that time she would also be free? Or would her lovers wait for a woman after her charms had begun to wane?

It was characteristic of her whole attitude towards the two Peverells that she thought of them in this connection as of one man.

What then? Must she waste her attractiveness of person and personality in the long lean years during which Nicholas Woodland continued to cumber the ground? In her heart she cursed her dead parents who had forced her careless girlhood into this hateful union with a wine-bibbing old man.

Her mind drifted, in cynical contemplation, to the woman in the next room. For a few moments she veered between admiration and contempt; half-envious of the courage which had dared the world's gossip, half-scornful of the folly which had invited it. Penniless and friendless as her guest appeared to be, had she bettered or impoverished her position by her mad flight from an unloved husband? Diana forced herself mentally into the other's situation, and ended her reviewing of it with a little shiver. No. She dared not risk it. Her stakes were too high. The man who was to be her second husband—and now he stood out clearly enough as the future Earl of Maumbury—might be induced to wait, if her charms remained unimpaired, but would a Peverell select as wife one who had made herself the subject of county scandal, however innocently? They were fastidious in their marriages, these Peverells; possibly that was why there scarcely had been a happy one amongst them. Added to which, her own inclinations, less from an appreciation of convention than of its advantages, were towards regularity of conduct. A loss of position would have been more intolerable to her than her husband's watchful jealousy and drunken insults.

No. The thing must be endured, and the Peverells kept dangling round her skirts until time or chance made her way plain.

The sound of the gate falling to drew her to the window. She looked down upon a small untidy garden of evergreens, ending in a pair of wrought-iron gates. An overgrown stone pathway led from these to the steps which ran up to the front door. The absence of a portico was compensated for by the existence of a stone balustrade which extended, roof high, along the entire front of the house, and supported a double pair of heavy stone urns. The house was placed in a curious out-of-the-way corner of the town, and looked out, across a narrow flagged passage, upon an ancient church and graveyard. In former times, it had belonged to the merchant princes of Poole. At present, it represented the nearest approach to the gaieties of urban residence which Diana had extracted from her husband's niggardly purse.

For the more inexpensive retirement of the country, or lengthy visits at the houses of his neighbours, better suited the old man's taste, and his wife longed for Dorchester in vain.

Immediately beneath Diana's eyes was the glossy oval crown of a grey beaver hat; below it, a pair of well-proportioned shoulders and the fore-shortened figure of a man. Seen in such perspective it might have been that of either Peverell. Diana, flushed of cheek, raised the sash and gazed abstractedly over to the dolphin which surmounted the vane on the neighbouring church tower. When she let her eyes fall in apparent carelessness a moment later, the man below was, as she had expected, standing a little away from the door and looking up at her. He was Gervis.

Diana withdrew her hot face, and felt it cool quickly. She was conscious of a sense of disappointment. Yet, she demanded of herself, what would she have? Only a minute ago she would have asked nothing better of Providence than this man's appearance.

She rang for her woman, and proceeded, in none too hasty a manner, to remove the traces of her recent stormy emotions. Meanwhile, Gervis Peverell waited.

It was a perfectly composed and rather stately Diana who presently came in to greet him. There was even in her manner a hint of the disappointment which had genuinely moved her at the first sight of him. She gave him her hand with a somewhat perfunctory air, and had been careful to put on none of the handsome gifts which he had bestowed upon her from time to time. Instead she was wearing some trivial ornaments which he had once forced her to admit had been given to her by Felix—and wearing them with an ostentatious simplicity.

"The time has seemed long since we parted," said he, relinquishing her fingers which were slipping all too quickly away.

"Has it?" returned Diana, rejecting the chair he had placed for her, and choosing one for herself. "By the way, how long is it? When did we part last?"

"My memory is better than yours," he replied with a faint touch of pique. "It was at the Blackmore Hunt Supper; immediately after it, to be precise. You were kind enough to grant me five minutes alone after all—all—the other guests had gone."

"Was I?" She looked at him in languid perplexity. "I thought that was Felix."

"You had, I fancy, already dismissed him," retorted Peverell.

Diana laughed, and reached out for a fire-screen.

"Of course!" she cried. "I remember now. I met Felix again the next morning. You were sandwiched in between my talks with him."

"The middle ingredient of the sandwich is the most important," Peverell said.

Diana condescended to be amused at his wit, but instantly capped it with her own.

"Still, a little of it goes a long way—hence the lesser quantity," said she.

Peverell shrugged his shoulders.

"I hope Felix was entertaining—the next morning," he observed pointedly. "I usually find him the most intolerably dull company the day after a supper-party."

"Ah!" she sighed; "how little you know and appreciate your brother."

"Felix has a way of concealing his great gifts from me," Peverell rejoined acidly. Then he raised his eyes to her face. It had grown tender now with a barren regretfulness that this man, who she had determined should offer her formal marriage before he left the house, was not the more fascinating and versatile Felix.

"Are you certain that you understand him any better than I?" he asked.

Diana's lips parted in a little proud confident smile.

"I know him," she answered, "better than he knows himself."

Peverell, exasperated at her apparent trust, caught back an angry oath. Then he came near. In playing her own game, Diana had forced his hand. Punctilious where lesser points of honour were concerned, Gervis Peverell would have been content to leave his brother to explain his position in his own way; and for himself, to reap the benefits of Felix's admission later on. But Diana's openly implied predilection for his fraternal rival left his jealousy no choice. He decided to tell her at once what he believed to be the truth.

"Has Felix ever told you that he loves you?" he asked more with the air of an inquisitor than of a lover.

Diana flushed brightly, and glanced up at him as he sat himself on the arm of her chair.

"Do you think, Mr. Peverell," said she, "that a woman ever tells such secrets?"

"You're very formal, Diana," he answered, gently removing the screen which divided their two faces. "It used to be 'Gervis.'"

"I prefer 'Mr. Peverell' now."

"Ah! . . . now. Soon it will be—Lord Maumbury. Doesn't that designation please you even better still?"

Diana shivered; all her blood was a-stir. Yet she answered composedly:

"No title, nor the want of a title, could influence my regard for any man."

"That's a noble sentiment, my Diana, but it hardly meets the case, since you give me no clue as to what man is in your mind."

She appeared confused, and endeavoured to regain control of the hand-screen.

"I thought—I hoped," she murmured, "that I had made myself sufficiently understood—Mr. Peverell."

"Then, by God, it is Felix!" cried he.

Diana's heart throbbed beneath his vehemence. Her eyes glowed darkly behind the painted thing of gauze and feathers. She waited for his next words. When they came they were as passionate as she could have desired, but were not such as she had expected.

"Then supposing I tell you that this lover of yours has forgotten you?" he asked. "That he has tired of your charms, and is no longer willing to wait until you are free? That he has found another woman to take your place?—one who need not burden his patience by delay, but who can marry him at once? What would you have to say to all that, my glorious Diana? What would you think of Felix then?"

She gave him the gratification of seeing her startled face.

"Because," Peverell added with a swift following up of his advantage, "that's the truth—the sheer plain truth, and God in heaven can't alter it!"

Diana leant back, and no longer attempted concealment of her supposed emotions.

"It can't be true," she said, her lips narrowing shrewishly. "Only the last time—that last time, in Maumbury Rings—he swore he'd wait for eternity."

"Eternity's a mere flea-bite with some men," answered Peverell, watching her. "But since my word's not good enough for you, ask Felix himself. He's easily got at. He's only up at Kinson, looking after the new Gift Horse, and his own new lady-love at the same time. I hope he won't be so engrossed with the one as to neglect the other. Since it'll be my horse before long, and I'm particular about my animals, as you know."

Diana sat up. In her heart she had never intended, given the opportunity of her husband's death, to marry the younger scion of the Peverells. But also in her heart, whatever affection she had to give had always been for him. Gervis had moved her ambition; Felix had stirred a warmer emotion. That it had also proved a weaker did not make his alleged defection any more palatable now. She caught, therefore, at the hope which her companion's last words had raised.

"You're wrong!" she said in challenging tones. "Felix is not there. I know, because I went to find him a week ago."

Peverell's eyebrows went up.

"Did you? Well, if he wasn't there, he ought to have been. But my story's true for all that, Diana."

She made no further attempt to refute it. It needed only a moment or two's reflection to understand its obvious truth. Not because she believed Gervis Peverell incapable of lying, but because she knew him to be clear-headed enough not to indulge in a profitless lie. And since she herself was not yet in a position to reward his greater devotion, there could be little advantage in his maligning his brother. She looked at him uneasily, her foot tapping the floor.

"Well?" he asked. "What do you think of your faithful Felix now?"

"There is no faith in your sex at all, Mr. Peverell. That is what I think."

"A very sweeping assertion, my beautiful Diana. And scarcely a just one. Have I ever given you cause to doubt me?"

"Not your friendship, perhaps," answered she. "Yes; you have always been a good—friend, Mr. Peverell."

"And nothing more?" he demanded assertively.

Diana was thinking quickly. While her woman's vanity and self-love, even that facile affection of hers, had been wounded by this unwelcome tidings of her recent adorer, her ambition had gathered strength and cunning from the blow. More than ever did it seem imperative that Gervis Peverell himself should be bound to her by some understanding which should be in effect a deferred betrothal.

"As a married woman,"—so at length she answered him—"I have no right to ask for more."

"Yet you have encouraged me to think that you desire more," he rejoined.

"One cannot always be on one's guard," she said with averted eyes. "But one day you will follow Felix's lead; and I shall lose even my friend."

"Then—though I swear your fears are groundless—" cried he, "give me the right to be more than that to you!

You know that I love you; I have told you that a score of times already. Give me your promise that as soon as you can you will reward my devotion."

Her eyes sparkled. It was not the passion in the man's tone, not even a coquettish sense of triumph in that she had achieved what she had purposed to do, that warmed her cheek so brightly, but the seductive whisper of her own heart—*the Countess of Maumbury.*

"If I promise you that in my husband's lifetime," she said at length, "to-morrow you will despise me."

"No, no! Never that, Diana. Never that, my love."

"Wait till to-morrow!" she urged.

"But why should I wait?" he cried. "I want my answer now."

"And know that to-morrow your desire will probably be less!"

"How can you doubt me so?" he cried, his blood warmed to an impatience that must, he felt, break down her womanly caution. Had she loved him she might have been carried away by it and compelled to give him the promise which he asked. As it was, she merely used it as a weapon for herself.

She leant towards him a little.

"Then prove it to me," she murmured seductively. "Write to me to-morrow, if you are indeed still in the same mind, and ask me for my promise then—Gervis."

And while his kisses were falling hotly upon her lips, her heart sang its own song—*Countess of Maumbury; Diana Maumbury*—and her yearning ambition was nearly at rest.

Yet the next day found her wondering why his letter did not come.

VI

THE OTHER WOMAN

A CHANCE, which depended upon two doors opening at precisely the same moment, brought Gervis Peverell face to face with Bathia. Recognition sprang simultaneously into the two pairs of eyes, and changed immediately into a curiously expectant look, as if either was seeking the cue for conduct from the other's expression.

Ironical the situation undoubtedly was; more especially from Peverell's point of view. For he stood momentarily between his would-be love and the woman for whose sake he had rejected her overtures. Moreover, as he understood it, here was the irrefutable proof of his brother's infidelity to Diana. A fine appreciation of all this helped him to recover his coolness. He bowed with all the Peverell charm of gesture.

" Present me to your friend," he said to Diana, who was unaware of the import of the meeting.

She made the introduction at once.

" Mrs. Chaldecott, this is an old friend of my husband," said she, " —Mr. Peverell."

The man of the world was nearly thrown off his balance. Bathia, the inexperienced girl, met his gaze coolly. A puzzled silence ensued on Peverell's part. Diana knew nothing; Bathia explained nothing. Left to find his own interpretation, he was led to believe that Felix's marriage had already taken place, and the disguise of an assumed name adopted until after the race, lest the story should get round to the ears of the earl. He admired his brother's adroitness, but wondered what impulse had led him to house his new wife in the home of his old love. Meanwhile, Bathia gave no sign of any previous acquaintanceship.

" I'm charmed to meet any friend of Mrs. Woodland," said he, letting his experienced eyes run over the fresh young face and supple form of the woman he could have had for the taking.

" I am equally pleased to meet a gentleman so well known as Mr. Peverell," replied she.

" Then let us hope that an acquaintance so happily begun will not end here," he rejoined. " Are you fortunately making a long visit—Mrs. Chaldecott ? "

Diana struck in languidly.

" I ought to tell you, Gervis, that Mrs. Chaldecott is a very brave lady, quite one after your own heart. She saved me on the road from what might have been a nasty accident —didn't you, my dear ? She got those mettlesome bays of mine under control while Wilkins was gaping at them."

" Then I can only stand before her an admiring and grateful man," said Peverell.

But though he complimented both women, he looked only at one. And that one was not Diana.

Diana herself was quick to observe this. She began to realize more perfectly that this guest of hers was fully five years younger than herself, and not a shade less beautiful, though in a softer, more subtly alluring way. She had generously garbed her in one of her own gowns—a shimmering thing of blue—and sent her woman to arrange her visitor's richly coloured hair. The rest and comparative freedom from alarm had restored all the girl's hitherto unappreciated charm. She glowed before Peverell like a half-opened rose. The swansdown at her throat was not whiter than the throat itself; the cerulean gown no bluer than her eyes. Her lips, he saw now, were fine and firm, her glance a little proud.

There was as well an air of aloof dignity about her in spite of her apparent lack of any ill-feeling towards himself which drew him almost as much as her beauty itself. For the moment it was as difficult to remember that this was she who had attempted to fling herself into his arms, as it was to believe that he had rejected her. He fell to wondering what that rascal Felix, who had kicked so hard against the marriage, thought of her. How often had the lucky young devil kissed that soft cheek, those fine firm lips? If he was not entirely satisfied, Peverell felt assured that it would be himself who would do the kicking when next they met.

Diana's cool voice interrupted his thoughts. Bathia was already turning away.

"Did I understand, Mr. Peverell," said the elder woman, "that you wished to see my husband before you left?"

"By no means," replied he, regarding her calm face quizzically. "It is a pleasure I proposed to defer. I have business in the town."

"So I should have judged," said Diana Woodland drily. And to Bathia—"My dear, I will join you in a moment."

The door closed upon the girl. Instantly Peverell turned to the woman at his side.

"How long have you known that lady?" he asked. "Mrs. Chaldecott, did you call her?"

—"I have known her only a short time, and of her history I know practically nothing. . . . You seem interested, Gervis."

Five minutes ago he would have welcomed this opportunity of proving to her the certainty of Felix's defection. But now he felt an unreasonable reluctance to make the disclosure.

"Yes," he said with persistent coolness. "I am interested."

Diana smiled.

"Yet I must lay the seal of secrecy upon you," she declared. "You must not speak of what you have seen. Mrs. Chaldecott does not wish her friends to know where she is, for the present."

"I will be discretion itself. Where did you meet the lady?"

" On the Wimborne road," said Diana vaguely. " The day I went to see Felix."

" I see," said Peverell. He stood stabbing at the floor with his cane. There was still a great deal which he did not understand. But Diana Woodland was looking not altogether pleased, and on the whole the elusive Bathia formed such a charming mystery to his sophisticated mind that he was in no way encouraged to ask further questions, just now. He resolved to seek out Felix, and learn the facts from him.

So it came about that the parting between Diana and himself, private though it was, ended on a less tender note than would have been expected by either of them ten minutes ago. Peverell was slightly absorbed, Diana, not wholly pleased; and their adieux suffered accordingly. Her last words to him contained a warning not to repeat his visit for some weeks. And it was not altogether the jealousy of old Nicholas Woodland that was in her mind as she spoke of the danger.

As Gervis Peverell left the house the vision of a fair face moved on either side of him. That both of these women were legally bound to another man might cause him to curse his luck, but none the less did the circumstance make for his allurement in either case.

The finding of Felix, with whom it was advisable to confer on the matter of the race, no less than for the satisfying of his curiosity, was the first matter to which he turned his attention. There were difficulties in the case. Felix was evidently in hiding—skulking away as usual, Peverell supposed, from his creditors. Back at his inn, the elder brother spent the best of an hour in endeavouring to decide on the most likely means to his end. At odd moments he found his mind glancing back to Bathia. Did she know or suspect the relations between her hostess and her husband? Was she aware of that husband's present abiding-place? How soon would she leave the shelter of Diana's roof? And so on.

At length, though the chance was a poor one, he could form no happier plan than an endeavour to succeed where Diana had failed—an attempt to run his brother to earth in the spot where he had the last sure knowledge of his presence. He himself had newly left Dorchester, so that Felix could not be looked for there. But he had certainly been, within the past few weeks, in the Kinson district. Obviously he had parted with his bride in the same vicinity. He might have caught the London coach at the nearest connection, or have walked over to the hunting-lodge on the

Maumbury estates. Since he had dismissed his wife so summarily, the latter supposition seemed the most probable. In either case, he must have left some traces behind—traces which Diana, in the limited time at her disposal and with her necessary restrictions, had not been able to pick up.

With the natural sense of satisfaction attendant upon the formation of a decision, Peverell prepared to dismiss the whole matter for the present. When suddenly there darted into his mind an irritating question—Was the marriage already an accomplished fact? The wedding-ring on Mrs. Chaldecott's finger was an added exasperation, not a proof at all.

He lay back in his chair and thought. More than ever did it seem imperative to find Felix.

The next day found him early in the saddle, on his way to that eastern corner of the county where the fortunes of his house seemed to be involved. Arriving before mid-day, he went first to look for his brother on the ancestral ground. But the caretaker at the hunting-lodge had no information for him. Meäster Felix hadn't not been a-seen in theäse parts to year.

Satisfied with the denial, he pressed on to *The Horse and Jockey*, with the object of tapping the proprietor of the inn for news.

His first question drew out the information that Felix had visited the place within the last few weeks, that he had a-left sudden-like, and that, if you was to say ' Mat Vidler, here be dree golden guineas for ye,' Mat Vidler couldn't a-tell 'ee where Mr. Felix had a-gone.

Peverell began to lose temper. What the devil, he asked himself angrily, did Felix mean by hiding away so securely that his own brother was unable to find him?

He continued his interrogations with so much vehemence that the whole house became interested. Inasmuch that, glancing presently through the open doorway, he counted eight heads of various shapes and colours and revealed in a nicely graduated proportion, decorating the precise point where the balustrade joined the landing floor.

" Can't those fellows tell me anything? " he demanded.

Vidler went out on to the landing to conduct the investigation.

Thomas Sprake, whose visage was cut off at the upper lip, made signs that he had something to communicate.

" Plase your wurship," stammered he, " a' did hear en say, the night he were here wi' schoolmeäster, that he'd writey, an' let t'other know where he med be found! "

Peverell rose with an exclamation of impatience. "Where is this schoolmaster fellow of yours?"

"Why, that, sir, none of us rightly knows on, at present. But——"

"What a pack of damned fools you are!" cried Peverell. "And I'm no better to be wasting time in listening to you. Bring my horse round at once, and let me get away from here."

"Beggen pardon, sir," interrupted Mat, "'tisn't such fool's work, after all. There's a letter coome from our Mr. Chaldecott——"

"From whom?" cried Peverell, staring.

"From him as we be talken of, sir. As used to be schoolmeäster over to Parley. He'm left now, but there's a letter coome by last night's coach, as is to be sent on to him."

"Where—where to?"

"Why, that I can't rightly tell ye, sir, not bein' no girt scholard, but the chap wi' the mail said 'twas to goo by the next Salisb'ry coach."

"For God's sake, bring it to me!" cried Peverell.

When a general stampede down the stairs had been effected, the letter was escorted up by the entire assembly. Gervis Peverell snatched at it, and swore softly.

"That will do. You can all go," he said tersely.

Vidler held out his hand, expecting the letter back, and gaped when he saw his honoured guest putting it into his pocket.

"As I'm going straight to this gentleman," Peverell remarked coolly, "I'll save the mail the trouble of carrying it."

He turned and re-entered the room. When he had shut out all the prying eyes, he tore the letter open.

It was written by Felix himself, and told him the first thing he wanted to know—his brother's whereabouts. Thus it ran:

"Sir,

"Address me Mr. T. Brown, No. 2, Waterloo Row, Poole, Dorset. Have you got the business done yet?

"Yours, etc.,

"————"

Gervis Peverell, realizing what an act of unconscious folly he had committed, swore savagely, and flung the letter into the grate. A moment later he saw that it had fallen on to one of the hobs at the side. He thereupon picked it up, and swore again.

Poole was just the one place where he had not thought of looking for his brother.

VII

THREE AT VARIANCE

GERVIS PEVERELL was shown into the shabby little front room of the second house in Waterloo Row, and surprised his brother at supper.

" Upon my soul, how you startled me ! " cried Felix, springing up at once. " A pleasure I didn't expect, my friend. You look tired. Sit down, and make yourself at home. Where did you come from, and what's brought you here ? "

The elder Peverell was in an ill temper. He threw himself into an armchair and stretched out his legs, scowling a little at his debonnair brother. It was Felix's quality always to wrest comfort out of the most unpromising materials. He seemed at ease, even to a luxurious degree, in his present cramped and homely quarters.

" Queer knack you've got, Gervis," he said, noticing his visitor's frown, " of dropping in just when a fellow feels lonely. Pull your chair up, man. This lobster salad's excellent."

" A pretty dance you've led me," said Peverell, disregarding his brother's hospitality. " Who the devil would have expected to find you here ? "

" Just the very thing I was thinking about you, my dear fellow," returned Felix, " only I wasn't going to open business before you'd had your supper."

" I didn't come for entertainment," said Peverell angrily. He had straightened himself in his chair, and the marks of displeasure were still heavy upon him. " What are you doing here ? "

Felix laughed light-heartedly. Being, as he considered, on the right side of the hedge, he had no fear of his brother's wrath.

" Oh, the usual thing," he replied. " Same as yourself; keeping out of the way. How did you manage to dig me out ? "

Peverell threw the crumpled letter on to the table.

" Hulloa ! what's this ? " cried the other. Then recognizing it, he whistled softly, with an inquiring glance at his brother. " Opened, by Jupiter ! Your work, Gervis ? "

His levity had sobered down considerably. He swung round from the table, wide-eyed, and a little resentful.

Peverell nodded. Felix crushed the letter in his hand.

" This," said he, " is the second time you've tampered with my correspondence. If it happens again, we shall quarrel. I mean it. . . . How did you get this ? "

"It was waiting at the inn at Kinson. They told me of it, and as I wanted to find you quickly I couldn't be punctilious. I thought there might be an address inside. There's no harm done."

"Perhaps not. Still," said Felix drily. "I don't like your methods, and I thank God they're not mine. . . . Well, now you've found me, what is it?"

"I want a talk with you."

"Open country ahead and easy going! Drive on."

"First then, do you consider you're conducting this affair with the best possible taste?—to say nothing of the caution advisable in such a delicate matter."

"A delicate matter," said Felix, "always means a woman. Who is she in this case? There's such a confounded lot of 'em about."

"I'm speaking of the lady you are bound to marry. Unless she is already your wife."

"Oh, her!" cried Felix. "The Amazonian bride. What of her?"

"That's not the way to refer to a lady," said Peverell sharply.

"Oh, Lord!" laughed Felix; "what does it matter? The horse-racing daughter of an insignificant squireen! What did you ask me?"

"Why did you send her to Diana's?"

Felix sat up.

"Diana's?" he exclaimed in amazement. "I send her to Diana's? What sort of a fool do you take me for?"

"Didn't you send her?"

"Certainly not!"

"She's there, then," affirmed Peverell, growing even more interested.

"Queer!" said Felix. "There? Now?"

"I saw her there only yesterday. I spoke to her, in fact."

"Ah!" said Felix, his eyes on his brother's face. And he waited to hear more.

"Diana presented me."

"The devil she did! Well, 'tis a queer business, and I'm afraid I can't help you to an explanation. I know less about it than you seem to do."

"You ought to know a great deal more. Has the marriage taken place yet?"

"I'm afraid, my dear Gervis, you've come to the wrong man for information concerning the Amazon."

"What do you mean?" Peverell's brow was dark with suspicion and anger. "Have you married her or have you not?"

"My very dear Gervis—I have not."

Peverell sprang up with an oath.

"Don't get ungentlemanly," said Felix in silky tones. "I'll tell you all about it. It's all safe; no need to worry. The girl's probably married by now, or else is going to be. In any case, she thinks it's to me—to Felix Peverell, you understand. I fell in with a fellow who was just as eager to marry her as I was not to, so I made her over to him. The thing was much more simple than it sounds. She didn't know either of us from Adam. He swore he wouldn't let out the truth until the race was over, and that he'd keep her to her word. There's the whole thing in a nutshell. No harm done, but an infinite quantity of good. This fellow makes the marriage he wanted; the Amazon gets a husband; you win your bet; and I, the insignificant instrument of Providence, get my chance with Diana, after all. There!"

He cracked a walnut sharply, and laughed at his brother's angry face. For a moment that brother was silent. Then the torrent of his wrath broke forth. Felix, wondrously impervious to it all, was steadily abused and sworn at for his folly, his want of foresight, his deception, his low trickery. When he had heard enough, he flourished the nutcrackers under the speaker's nose, and told him so.

"I knew you'd be a little upset," he explained gaily. "That's why I proposed to keep things dark until the race was over."

"Race, you idiot!" cried Peverell, his whole figure trembling with anger. "How do you know there'll be any race? If this fellow who's married her loved her well enough to get her in such a way, is he likely to allow her to risk her neck in a steeplechase? Ask yourself that, you fool!"

"You're wrong in your reckoning, my buck. He's married her out of hate; not out of love at all. Oh, don't ask me the reason of it! I didn't question him. But from his conversation I should judge that he'll be damned glad if his lovely lady does break her neck."

"Don't talk like a hound!"

"Well, 'tis too late for either of us to feel squeamish on the she-jockey's account," remarked Felix. "Besides, she isn't going to break her neck. Where should we be if she did? As to the young man himself, I think you can trust him."

"I hope to God we can! He's this Chaldecott, of course?"

Felix nodded.

"A vindictive sort of young dog, too," he said thoughtfully. "I wonder why he sent her to Diana's. Is he there as well?"

"Apparently not. She told me nothing, of course. And Diana was reticent, even if she knew much. Which I doubt."

Felix looked a trifle anxious.

"We ought to understand a little more about their doings," he said. "There are no end of arrangements still to be made. . . . She ought to see the course. . . . I was going to write instructions to Chaldecott. I wish I could see him."

"So do I," said Peverell gloomily.

"Why the devil didn't he take her straight to town?" demanded Felix with increasing discomposure.

"That's for you to find out!" retorted his brother. "It seems to me that you've got the whole affair into a devil of a mess—confound you!"

"We'd better get it cleared up as soon as possible."

"There I agree with you! How do you propose to do it?"

"You must see the girl, Gervis, and get her to explain."

"H'm! I see. You've tangled the reins and I'm to get them in working order, eh?"

"You've got to; I can't appear in the affair. Diana knows who I am, and the girl thinks she's married me—or that the man she's married is me," said Felix with an emotional disregard of coherency and grammatical accidence alike.

Peverell scowled at the fire.

"What good would it do to see the girl?" he asked irritably. "She'd tell me nothing. She's probably waiting for instructions from her husband. Besides, we met under Diana's eyes as strangers. To admit an acquaintanceship now would only embarrass her——"

"And make Diana angry!" laughed Felix. "I understand. You're afraid of that."

"Never mind my reasons!" retorted the other. "'Tis the man we must deal with, after all."

"Very good," replied Felix. "You know as well as I do where he's to be found, or at least heard of. I'll wait here for your report."

"And run the risk of being discovered, you fool! A chance meeting any day may bring out the truth."

"Gad, that's so! I didn't think of that!"

"You come with me," said his brother with decision. "You know the fellow. I don't. You'll be more useful there than here."

"'Twas a plaguey ill wind blew you into this port," said the younger, his obvious discontent showing through an enforced acquiescence. "I've only been here a few days, and haven't had a sight of Diana yet. I didn't dare write or call while that skinflint of an old tyrant was with her."

"Very discreet," remarked Peverell. He stood looking down at his lounging companion. "To-morrow, then," he said. "We'll leave at nine o'clock, and hunt up this interesting young friend of yours."

"Oh, you'll like him," said Felix, following his brother to the door. "You'll like him prodigiously. You'll get on as well together as—fire and ice!"

Gervis Peverell returned to his inn, wrote the overdue letter to his love, and prepared to face the anxieties of the next day. His brother's careless confidence that all was well had failed to remove his own uneasiness.

On the morrow, he routed Felix out at an early hour, and in the gloom of the December day the two made the journey to Southampton.

The time of the visit was in their favour, for Demas, himself but newly arrived in the town, had not yet left it. Since the unforeseen events following immediately upon his marriage, his own affairs had been engrossing and distracting enough to put the thought of Felix Peverell out of his mind—and his inability to communicate with him had not caused Demas any regret. Nor had the parson's grave warning respecting the elder brother's possible attitude made much impression upon the young man. His one thought was of Bathia, her safety and whereabouts. Until he was assured upon these points he shrugged his shoulders at what seemed to him to be merely side-issues.

But since the two Peverells had sought him out, he could not refuse to see them. More especially, as he had a faint hope that they might have brought him the news of which he was in search. Parson Willavize was out at the time of their arrival, so that the interview was robbed of his pacificating influence.

Demas found the brothers in the large room at the front of the house—Felix already at ease before the fire, Gervis standing erect, his eyes on the door. At the entrance of Demas, Felix rose and came forward, cheerfully assuming that there was not going to be any unpleasantness.

"How d'ye do, Mr. Chaldecott? Charmed to meet you again. Gervis, this is the Mr. Chaldecott I told you about—my brother, Mr. Gervis Peverell."

The two young men thus meeting for the first time took a long look at one another; a look in which inherent antagonism leapt out from each pair of eyes.

"My brother is right," said Peverell. "I have heard of you from him."

"An even honour," replied Demas. "He has also mentioned you to me. Pray be seated."

"Thank you, no," said Peverell stiffly, while Felix dropped back into his seat, and conveyed the impression that he had now performed his part of the interview. "Our business with you, Mr. Chaldecott, is of a rather delicate nature, and can, I think, be better introduced by my brother than myself."

Demas turned toward his former acquaintance, who, thus forced to come into the conversation, made an unwilling beginning.

"If it hadn't been for certain events," he said, "you'd have had a letter from me."

"Yes?" said Demas.

"Asking you a certain question."

"I am ready to answer it, Mr. Peverell."

"'Tis this: are you married to Miss Loveridge yet?"

Demas bowed slightly.

"Unhappily, I am."

Gervis Peverell, who had been watching Felix's hesitations with malicious amusement, turned to regard the speaker with a new interest. Demas caught the look. His expression changed and became a little defiant, and challenging. Felix sprang into the opening breach.

"Then that's all right!" he declared with hearty satisfaction. "I felt positive you were. The only thing that puzzled us a little was why you'd left her at Poole, at Mrs. Woodland's——"

Demas turned a pair of very eager eyes towards the speaker.

"Poole?" he cried. "Do you say that she is there?"

Felix's look of incomprehension deepened.

"Ask my brother," he said. "But do you mean to say that you didn't know it?"

"I did not," said Demas, recovering his balance under the dual scrutiny. "I am much obliged to both of you for the information."

"What a devilish odd thing!" muttered Felix. "A husband of a week or so who doesn't know where his bride is. Upon my soul, Chaldecott, I've half a mind to quarrel with you. 'Tis my character that's suffering, and, by gad, sir, it won't stand too much knocking about!"

"Stop your fooling!" bade the elder brother sharply. He turned to Demas. "Perhaps," said he, "as this matter so definitely concerns all three of us, you will be good enough to tell us plainly what you mean."

"Pardon me," answered Demas, no less coldly, "as I alone have married the young lady, I cannot see that the matter concerns anyone else."

At this, remembering his brother's suspicions of the previous evening, Felix threw off his levity, and broke out:

"But, damn it all, man, she's to ride for us, you know!"

"I am sorry to disappoint you, Mr. Peverell. Still more sorry to go back from my word. But there are other more vital considerations than either the gratification of your sporting instincts, or my promise. Miss Loveridge—excuse me, I prefer to call her so—will not risk her life for your pleasure and that of your dissolute companions. And there is an end of the matter."

Felix was on his feet. Peverell's flushed face was close to Demas Chaldecott's, bearing the fire of his stormy eyes.

"By God," cried Peverell, "she can't break her word like that! She's got to ride. She's promised, and she must! What right have you to try to persuade her out of it?"

"There is no question of persuading. Miss Loveridge has decided for herself."

"What?" cried Felix. "She refuses—now?"

"Absolutely. In this one matter, her mind and mine are the same, thank God!"

"The damned hussy!" cried Felix, falling back with a blank look.

"Sir!" Demas flashed the word at him like a challenge. Felix made an impatient gesture. Peverell was speaking again.

"But," he said with an incisive clearness, "Miss Loveridge has promised. She can't withdraw. Doesn't she understand that?"

"She made an imprudent promise under certain conditions. They have not been kept. She has every right and every reason to withdraw."

"Conditions? The marriage, you mean?"

"To Felix Peverell—yes. A condition not fulfilled."

"To all intents and purposes! My brother has told me of the fraud the pair of you devised. Since it has been successfully carried out, and the girl is still in ignorance——"

"There you are wrong, Mr. Peverell. She is not in ignorance. She is fully aware of the most damnable fraud that has been practised on her, and I repeat, she is perfectly justified, on those grounds alone, in her refusal."

"Your opinion is not required," said Peverell insultingly. "Keep to the facts. If she knows of the fraud—which was none of my doing—someone must have told her. Who did?"

"I told her," said Demas, meeting arrogance with open defiance.

Then Gervis Peverell cursed him aloud. Cursed him with a cold intensity which, matched against the fury of the other's resentment, left no doubt as to what the relations between these two must henceforth be.

When the words were at their highest, Felix, who had been overborne by the other two and unable to take part in the quarrel, felt it necessary to interfere. He did so sullenly.

"Come, Gervis," he said, plucking his brother's sleeve, "there's no use in all this. We've been outdone—ruined by the pair of 'em. I thought I was dealing with a gentleman——"

"And found only a man instead!" cried Demas, indiscriminate in his anger. "God knows what I was thinking of to play into your hands as I did!"

"Your repentance has come on devilishly soon!" retorted Felix. "A damned great pity it couldn't hurt only yourself. As my brother says, you've ruined us—made us the laughing-stock of the whole town, with your cursed scruples. What had it got to do with you? I kept my part of our bargain, and it was your duty to keep yours."

"And risk a woman's life?"

"You didn't seem to think of that when we made the bargain."

"Because I was a damned scoundrel then, is it any reason why I should remain so?"

"A damned scoundrel?" repeated Gervis Peverell, and struck the table at his side with his gloves. "A low-born trickster! And, by God, you may thank you low birth that you get off so easily. For—if you had been a gentleman—I would have killed you for this!"

Demas took a step forward with upraised hand. Felix caught his wrist and intercepted the blow.

"Don't be a fool!" he said sharply. "The heir of Maumbury can't fight a schoolmaster. You know that. You'll only get yourself sent to gaol."

Demas let his hand fall heavily to his side. The blood was singing in his ears; he was hot with shame at the humiliation of his position, which denied him the privilege of resenting an insult. He stood silent, his passion thriving upon itself. Felix, who, as the most amiable of the three, had contrived to keep freer from exaggerated emotions than the others, turned to his brother. Gervis Peverell was pale and contemptuous.

"Mr. Chaldecott owes you gratitude, Felix," he said, as though they two were alone together. "If he had done what he intended, he should certainly have seen the inside of a gaol for his impertinence."

"Oh, he meant no harm," said the peace-maker. "We'd better be going, I think. What's the use of staying here?"

Peverell was already drawing on his gloves.

"I am ready," he said. His command over himself was an example to the unrestrained Demas, whose breast was still heaving with the violence of his emotions. But it was at the younger man that Felix looked with the keenest attention. He had no cause to love him, since every interest of his own compelled him naturally to side with his brother, yet he was free, and knew himself to be free, from the bitter vindictiveness that glinted in Gervis Peverell's cold eyes.

Demas, still standing stiffly in the attitude into which Felix's intervention had thrown him, let them go without a word.

When his emotions had cooled somewhat, he found himself capable of regarding the incident in a saner light. At the same time, he could regard the other's anger with no more dread of possible reprisals than he had felt in the heat of the quarrel.

But Parson Willavize, dragging the story of the visit out of him, looked very grave.

"If you'll take my advice," he said, "you'll go away to the north, or anywhere out of sight and hearing for awhile. I'll find the funds."

"I won't trouble you, sir," said Demas in reply. "I've made my plans, and they carry me west, not north, I find."

"Where are you going?" cried the parson quickly.

"To Poole. And at once. To find my wife," said Demas.

VIII

PEVERELL PERCEIVES

Had that severe moralist, the ninth Earl of Maumbury, been aware of the intricacies of an affair of which he was as yet in ignorance, he would have held that not the least of Demas Chaldecott's sins was the change which his conduct had wrought in his unlucky partner in the fraudulent marriage.

He had turned Bathia Loveridge into Bathia Chaldecott. Between the two there was a vast difference.

Thrown back upon her old ways of thought by the rough spiritual handling which she had experienced on her return to her father's home, she had fled away like a frightened girl. Under Diana Woodland's careless protection, erratic cherishing, and superficial generosity, she had pulled her moral fibres together. Fear remained. The fear of her unloved husband, the dread of his legal claim upon her.

These things troubled her hourly, and in the night season filled her undistracted mind with an exaggerated emotion akin to terror. This was in great measure due to the fact that, in all her life, she had only known one man, her father, intimately, and of her husband, knew nothing at all. Before the betrayal of her marriage, she had been willing to accept from him, and even ready to take his integrity for granted. But the scene at the inn at Poole had changed all that. She was now distrustful of what she did not know, cautious where she had been confiding, reticent where she had been frank and open. And so the fear remained.

But with a difference.

The wild unrestrained flight that had brought her to her present haven would not be repeated now. The quiet retirement, the passage of the empty days, restored the fluttering nerves, and gave the development a rapid growth. She was thrown much upon herself at this time, for experience could not help her, and advice she would not seek, since to do so meant the humiliation of confessing to her own folly. In secret she brooded over her equivocal situation, and alone she sought the remedy.

She remained impassioned, but she grew calculating; not with the cool reasoning of Diana Woodland, which had its roots in a personal ambition. The instinct was a by-product of self-preservation, which, the longer she considered, lost more and more of its original quality, until a set of half-foreseen incidents brought it to a culminating desire for retributive action in the case of the Peverells, and for inviolable immunity as regarded Demas Chaldecott. Throughout the impending catastrophe, her motives were undoubtedly far purer in the one instance than in the other, although the issue was a more deadly thing.

Thus it came about that when events began once more to intrude themselves into her life, the mood was ready for them.

The only incident which found her unprepared was the chance encounter with Gervis Peverell. But the natural sequel was her discovery that he had lied to her in the matter of his alleged husbandhood. So far had the inexperienced girl developed that when Diana assured her of this man's single estate, Bathia did not doubt her for a moment, in spite of Peverell's assertion of the secrecy of his marriage. She saw with a clear-eyed intuition that he had lied to avoid accepting her proposal, using his brother as an easy substitute. Such duplicity could not fail to bring him into the catalogue of those who had shamefully abused her confidence and brought her to her present unhappy plight. Henceforth he, whom she had considered the least culpable of the three, must now rank with his fellow conspirators—possibly slightly in advance of the other two.

A further meeting with him she had guessed to be inevitable. But the promptitude of it was unexpected.

Peverell, fresh from the illuminating interview with Demas Chaldecott, made his second appearance almost immediately, and was thoughtful enough to choose a time when his beloved Diana was from home. He sent in a request to see Mrs. Chaldecott. Bathia, after a moment's hesitation, granted it.

Too well-bred to become positively truculent, Peverell was still sufficiently raw from Demas's disclosures to allow his displeasure to sit fairly plainly upon him. There was no friendliness in the greeting on either side. In his annoyance he went straight to the point.

" I have come," he said, " to ask what arrangements you have made with regard to the race."

" None," said Bathia.

He affected surprise.

" But why is that—madam ? " he asked.

" Please don't be so formal," said she.

" Mrs. Chaldecott, then."

" Exactly. There you have my reason," said Bathia.

He bit his lip. Then he looked more closely at her. He had not expected such neatness of speech from a country-girl.

" I'm afraid," he said acidly, " that your wit is too keen for me."

" Hardly," returned she. " Since I must have learnt it from you. Don't you remember what I said ?—I promised that Mrs. Peverell should ride for you; nothing was said about a Chaldecott."

He eyed her sharply.

"Is that it?" he asked.

"Yes," said Bathia, and lowered her eyes beneath his scrutiny.

"I think," he said slowly, after a moment's pause, "that you cannot quite understand what your refusal means to me."

"I understand quite well," she told him with a frank upraising of her gaze. "You explained it all very clearly to my father that day, and I was listening."

"Then I need not remind you——"

"You need not, Mr. Peverell. I remember it all as well as I do the cruel, the shameless trick you played upon me!"

"That was not my trick!" he retorted at once. "If my brother behaved like a rogue, and got a worse rogue to help him, am I to be blamed and made to pay the price for that?"

"Mr. Peverell," said Bathia, "the first rogue was yourself."

A dull flush spread over his face. Yet because of her sex and her beauty, the freshness of which he was just beginning to appreciate, he controlled himself.

"How do you make that out?" he asked.

"You told me you could not marry me because you already had a wife. It was untrue."

"Well?" His tone was distinctly defiant. Bathia shrugged her shoulders.

"You deceived me," she accused. "You made the way ready for the other rogues."

He showed a slight tendency to bluster in a gentlemanly manner.

"Is there so much harm done?" he demanded. "Surely your case is not so very desperate! You desired marriage merely as an escape from an uncongenial home. Well—that at least you have achieved."

"At a price," she told him a little bitterly. "Whatever my home was, at least it made a home. Now I have none."

"Your husband——" he began, when she interrupted him with a sudden flash of more passion than she had hitherto displayed.

"My husband?" she cried. "A common cheat and trickster! A man who married me for his own base ends! A fellow whom my father very properly had flogged weeks ago for his disrespect towards me!"

"Oho!" said Gervis Peverell softly. His eyes had a subtle smiling quality in them.

"Do you think that I would take anything from him?" Bathia demanded with a kind of passionate dignity that set this student of women staring and wondering. "I tell you I would sooner beg my bread!"

"I commend your spirit," said Peverell. "Upon my soul, I didn't think you had so much."

"Then," retorted she, "perhaps you will understand that what I say I mean. I have told you that I will not ride."

"And truly you almost force me to believe that you do mean it," said he. "But are you beyond pity, as you seem to be beyond reason?"

"I am not unreasonable. And I have no pity for you, Mr. Peverell."

"But my fortune? My name?" he cried. "If you fail me now I shall be a ruined man and the laughing-stock of the town."

"You should have thought of that before you failed me," said Bathia stubbornly.

He bit his lips with annoyance. Then he fell to studying her—her winsome face and pretty figure, the firmness of her rounded lips, her glossy chestnut hair. Budding beauty and the allurement of youth were round her like a magic cloak to turn aside the darts of his displeasure. Unreasonable as it appeared even to himself, his anger against her was considerably less than his still burning wrath with Demas Chaldecott for having made her refusal possible. Moreover, the fact that the same Chaldecott could now legally claim so much charm and seductiveness as his own augmented Peverell's bitterness against the man, and lessened it towards the woman.

"Damn him!" he muttered half-aloud.

"Why?" asked the girl. "Because he told me?"

"Partly—yes," said Peverell. "And for the rest, because he's married you."

At first she misunderstood.

"I don't ask for your sympathy," she said.

"I don't sympathize with you," returned Peverell. "Only with myself." An irritated frown clouded his eyes. "Why," he broke out in sudden exasperation, "did you come to me in the half-dusk? It might have made things easier for both of us if you had not."

His look of open admiration brought the blood to her cheek. He no longer treated her like a dairymaid; he even seemed to have forgotten his primary cause for anger with her. She had no fear of him; it was only Demas Chaldecott whom she feared. But her animosity against this man as the original cause of her wrongs still bit sharply into her soul.

That was as far as he went on this occasion. He left her soon afterwards, in a complex frame of mind. He no longer had any hope that he could persuade her out of her unfriendliness, for unexpectedly he found himself a-tilt more strength of character than he had looked for in Squire Loveridge's countrified daughter. Not lacking in the cultured fortitude of his class, he resigned himself to face the consequences of his rashness, trusting to the imminent demise of his uncle the earl to set him on his feet and to still the jeering laughter at his unlucky bet.

As he was leaving the house he came face to face with Diana and her husband. He remembered that she had not yet answered his letter. To charge her with the implied coldness was impossible in Nicholas Woodland's presence. When invited to return to the house, he excused himself with less than his usual adroitness, and Diana looked displeased. The wintry sunshine fell full upon her face, and revealed a little heaviness under the eyes. For the first time since he had known her, Gervis Peverell asked himself what her age might be.

When he had passed on, Diana remained thoughtfully gazing after him. A croak at her side recalled her straying fancies.

" He, he ! a fine figure o' a man, dost think ? Not so fast, my beauty ! Must bide until I be tucked away under the sods before ye can make sheep's-eyes at he ! "

Diana shot a glance at him.

" Get indoors ! " she said, and passed before him.

He followed, chuckling.

" Thinks I can't see, does she ? " he croaked. " He, he ! Old Nick Woodland ben't such a fool as some do think ! "

IX

GLORIA MUNDI

On the last day of the year Lord Maumbury wrote two letters. In due course they arrived at their several destinations, and dictated certain lines of action to the recipients.

Felix Peverell, moving about more openly now, read his in one of the best appointed inns in Poole, and hastened, not wholly disinterestedly, to obey his relative's commands.

He was directed to convoy the hereditary royal gift, known as the King's Gift Horse, from the Maumbury estate at Parley to the earl's stables at Wyke Hall.

The other letter, had it been compared with the first, would have been found to bear the stamp of a more personal desire. It set Parson Willavize travelling mentally over much well ploughed ground.

It had ever been his distasteful experience that however long or however often a responsibility might be shelved, it had to be faced at last. Lord Maumbury's letter brought him once more up against the problem of Julia.

After a little private swearing and wholesale condemnation of the Peverells, root and branch, he summoned that dainty damsel to his presence.

She came in, fresh and smiling. His vacillating heart yearned towards her. A less worldly man might have decided himself to repair any damage done to her fortunes by the loss of the husband the earl had chosen for her. But Parson Evurtius saw the desirability of a bride with full hands over her with empty ones. And he was persuaded that his lordship might be induced to recompense the girl for the loss of Demas Chaldecott.

" Julia," said he.

" Yes, sir "—with a pretty curtsey reminiscent of the Charity School.

" Don't twiddle your fingers, my dear. Keep your hands still. That's better. I was going to say that my Lord Maumbury, the Right Honourable the Earl of Maumbury and Viscount Palladour, you understand—— "

" Oh, la ! " cried Julia; " is he all that ? "

" He is," said the parson, nodding gravely. " A very great man indeed."

" I should think so," murmured the over-awed girl.

" —has sent me a letter."

" May I see his noble writing ? " pleaded Julia. " Just one little peep ? "

" You shall see more than that," said the parson. " You shall see the noble lord himself."

Julia shrieked. It was so adventurous, so fascinating.

" What ? Alone ? "

" By no means," the parson assured her. " You're twiddling your thumbs again ! Hold on to your apron or something, and try not to be so countrified. It wouldn't be at all proper for a young maid like you to go to see an unmarried gentleman alone, even though he is a lord, and a confounded methodist, and old enough to be your father.

I shall escort you myself," he added with parochial dignity.

"You're very good, sir," murmured Julia, wondering whether "escort" meant driving or walking.

"Go with you, I mean," explained Willavize. "Do try to understand unusual words, my girl! My lord wishes to see you at his place in Dorset, Wyke Hall. A very wonderful mansion indeed. He names next Thursday. Tell Mrs. Virgin to see that you're properly habited—got decent clothes, I mean—and hold yourself in readiness for the journey."

"Yes, sir. Why—what can such a great nobleman want to see me for?"

"Heaven knows!" said the parson a little wearily. "We'll find out when we get there. And, Julia, attend! Every morning till then you'll come in here to receive instruction on deportment—I mean, on how you're to behave in his lordship's presence."

Thus was Julia of the tragic antecedents and the rosy future schooled and drilled for a certain time every day, in order that she should be fit to appear before the seats of the mighty.

Julia herself would have declared that the education was continued the whole day long. When the parson dismissed her with commendation, Mrs. Virgin took her in hand, with more austerity. From morning to night the housekeeper, resenting, with the petty jealousy of her class, the favouritism designed for her unconscious rival, so harassed and perplexed the girl with fault-finding and impossible directions, that Julia grew nervous and unhappy at the honour in store for her.

If she could have escaped the ordeal she would have foregone the glory. But she dared not so affront the dignity of an earl, or disappoint her kind protector who had taken so much pains over the matter. For the parson, having faced the business fairly, had brought his natural good-nature to make the best of it.

But if the homely maiden had trembled in spirit before setting out, it was a very physical weakness that assailed her at the journey's end. Seen in all the pure severity of its wintry surroundings, Wyke Hall appeared as a huge formal edifice, silent, orderly, overwhelmingly magnificent. The double avenue of elms, the deer park, the pleasaunce adjoining the mansion, the house itself, with its noble Corinthian portico, broad flights of steps, and upper and lower terraces, the glimpse of vast greenhouses, filled even at this season with the glory of blossom and luxuriant foliage

—all turned the girl's heart to water as her frightened eyes roamed around such unaccustomed environments. It was only the parson's arm which kept her from falling as she stumbled up the steps.

At the opening of the door fresh terrors sprang at her in the shape of the two liveried footmen who were then revealed. In actual fact, the livery was exceeding sober, and the number of the attendants beneath their master's estate. But the solemn faces, the heavily powdered wigs, the perfect carriage of the two, impressed the girl to such a degree that while she lacked the courage to run away, she had scarcely sufficient to proceed. Weak and spiritless, aware that she was doing the thousand and one things she had been told not to do, she followed her conductor across a paved hall and into an apartment the heavy old-fashioned furniture of which seemed to her to be magnificence itself.

"My lord will see you alone, sir," said the servant.

"Very good," returned the parson. He spoke to Julia. "Wait here until you are summoned," he said. "There's plenty for you to look at."

Then he followed the man from the room, and a great silence, broken only by a very soft ticking from a French gilt clock, settled down upon the frightened girl.

For the first few moments she stood in precisely the same attitude in which they had left her. If she moved, she felt that she must scream. The solemn splendour weighted this little kitchen maid down to the ground. The carpet was so soft, the upholstery so rich, the ornaments so beautiful. Presently another solemn-faced manservant came in to mend the fire. Julia longed to see a female figure. When the man had gone, and the freshly laid logs were caught by the flames, she took courage to cross the room to the fireplace that she might warm herself. In truth, the girl was shivering, but more with nervousness than with cold. As she stood there, her feet half-hidden in the thickness of the sheepskin rug, she timidly raised her eyes to the wonders of the coloured marble mantelpiece. Roaming among the carved ivories and china ornaments that stood upon the shelf, her gaze encountered the bland face of the little French clock. She regarded it miserably. It marked the hour as twenty minutes past two.

The coach by which they were to leave on the return journey was due to depart at four o'clock. Lord Maumbury's carriage had brought them from the posting-house at Weymouth to the Hall in something less than half an hour. That meant, so Julia fearfully argued, that she would be obliged to endure the misery of her present uncongenial surroundings for another hour. She grew weak at the thought. Oh, would the parson never return and get the interview over? Supposing they missed the coach, would they have to spend the night in this house? They had slept at an inn the previous night. That had been bad enough. Julia hated strange ways, strange faces, strange rooms. She grew cold with apprehension as the slow minutes ticked away and the parson did not return.

Then a foolish hope, such as could have arisen only in the mind of an ignorant and undeveloped girl, raised her spirits and brought the blood to her cheek. Supposing—so her simple hypothesis ran—Parson Willavize did not come to fetch her until there remained but the bare half-hour necessary for their return to the town? Why, then, there would be no time at all for the dreaded meeting with the noble old gentleman who lived in such a terribly grand way. How easy the solution seemed! Julia grew almost cheerful in contemplating the possibility.

Three o'clock. Then a door was shut softly in the distance. Oh, he was coming after all! She would have to go through with it. Unless. . . . With boldness born of desperation, she hastily raised her arm and moved the hands of the clock on to the desired hour. The parson's watch had stopped; he had said so in the coach. The deed done, she darted away agilely enough, and waited, her eyes on the door. Footsteps were passing, heavy uneven footsteps, as those of men who carry a load.

The house, so silent and orderly a minute ago, had broken out into a sudden commotion. More footsteps hurried past, voices called in subdued yet clear tones. Surely that was a horseman who had flashed past the window? Why did he ride so fast?

A vague alarm shook the uncomprehending girl. She could have screamed hysterically, and was forced to press her handkerchief against her lips in the effort at self-control. After what seemed many hours, Parson Willavize opened the door and looked in. He was very grave, and his rubicund complexion had paled considerably. . . .

Yet what had happened had not come altogether without warning. He had realized the certainty of its occurrence at no distant time as soon as he stood face to face with his friend.

He found the earl awaiting him in a small private study. He looked older, thinner, more withered than Willavize had yet seen him. Around his lips was a faint bluish tinge; the rest of his face was grey as ashes from which the fire has fled.

"My God, Everard," said the parson, grasping the frail hand, "but you're ill!"

"Sit down," said Lord Maumbury. "Not too far away—I can't hear as well as I did. Another of the Lord's tokens! Yes; I have not been well of late. I think my time is near at hand."

He rested his long white fingers on the head of his ivory stick, and regarded his visitor with eager questioning in his sunken eyes.

"Yes; that's all right," said the other carelessly. "I'm concerned about yourself, my lord. Have you been feeling worse since I was here last?"

"Never mind me. Let us talk while I am able. Why did he—young Chaldecott—never reply to my letter?"

The parson smoothed his chin.

"Didn't he? How devilishly uncivil! Young men aren't what they were in our time, eh? I'll give him a talking to when I see him again."

"When you see him? Where is he, then?"

"I scarcely know. He spent a few days with me last month. Since then——"

"I thought you had perhaps brought him with you."

"It wasn't possible. I've brought the girl, my lord."

"Ah, yes. The girl. Of course—the girl." Lord Maumbury sank back among his cushions. "Is she agreeable to the marriage?"

"Are you still bent on that?" the parson asked, frowning.

"The days of my spiritual debility are past," replied the other. "The Lord, in weakening my body, has mercifully strengthened my mind. Did you think I should change in this matter?"

"I hoped you would, my lord."

The other shook his head.

"The thing is not feasible," said Willavize bluntly. He still hoped, if possible, to spare his companion the mortifying details of Demas Chaldecott's open contumacy and reprehensible conduct. "I've given the matter very careful consideration, and you may take my word for it that it won't do."

"Your moral sense must be strangely perverted——" began Lord Maumbury.

"Damn my moral sense!" retorted the parson. "I didn't throw off the cloak of worldliness when I entered the

Church, my lord. I didn't even pretend to, as others do. No. I can look at a thing from more points of view than one still. But we'll not go over all the old ground, because I'm most damnation sick of both our arguments. The thing's impossible, and there's an end. Still, you might do something for Julia."

"Do I understand that the young woman is the stone of stumbling in my proposal?" asked the earl.

"Julia? Oh, Lord, no! Not at all. Don't blame her for a moment. She doesn't know anything about it."

"It is the young man, then?"

"You're right, my lord. Quite right," admitted Willavize unwillingly.

Lord Maumbury, leaning on his stick and gazing into the fire, seemed to shrink a little, to grow paler, to be a more ineffectual figure of a man. Willavize regarded him with some pity, and cursed Demas in his heart for having left this task to him.

"I think, however," said the earl presently, "that I will make a last appeal. It is the first thing I have ever asked him to do for me."

The parson's irritation forced him into bluntness.

"He couldn't oblige you now, my lord," he answered, "even if he were disposed to. The truth, since you will have it, is that Demas Chaldecott, in flat contradiction to your wishes, has gone off and married someone else."

Lord Maumbury's sunken cheek grew slowly a dull red. The old Adam flashed in the eyes which came hastily round to his companion's face. He half rose from his chair.

"Married? Demas married? To someone else? Why was I not told?" he demanded angrily. "What does it mean?"

"Keep quiet!" warned the parson. "No use in worrying now the mischief's done."

"But—but—is this an act of flagrant—ungrateful—insubordination, Willavize? A deliberate slighting of my known desire—an—an intentional disregard of my wishes? Answer me!"

The earl's excitement was increasing with every gasping sentence, and his stick was rapping the floor incessantly. The parson, not minded now to shield the delinquent from his patron's displeasure, answered:

"He was aware, of course, of the neglect of your desires implied in his act. Aware, too, of your probable anger. I did not fail to lay stress on these things. But the lad is wilfulness itself when he sets his mind to go his own way, and I might have well have talked to the moon. Still, his chief object was not the affront to yourself. It went far deeper, was more personal, than that."

"I do not hold him excused, Evurtius! At least, he should have consulted me. He assured me not so long ago, with all the appearance of truth, that he had no inclination to marry at all."

"Oh, it was the truth then," said the parson coolly.

"He has fallen in love very quickly," retorted the earl.

"Men have got through their courtship in less time," observed the other with abstracted eyes.

"Possibly!" assented the thin voice at his side. "Who—who is the lady? I—I have a right to know that! Who is she, I say!"

"Quietly now, my lord, quietly." Willavize laid his firm hand on the quivering arm, and looked with some doubt into the agitated face. Yet the anxiety might prove as harmful as knowledge of the fact. So he went on. "The lady is—was—Miss Loveridge, of Kinson Place, near to Wimborne," he said.

The earl uttered a cry, and rose to his feet. The stick fell from his hands as he raised them with a look of horror.

"Loveridge?" he gasped. "The infidel—the polluter of youth—the blasphemous follower of the high-priest of iniquity? He has dared to link himself to that accursed race, that he may add sin to sin?"

"Sit down!" urged the parson, and laid his hand on the heaving shoulder. "There's no great harm done."

The earl regarded him with horrified eyes. He refused to control himself; because such power had left him for the time.

"But the man is a rank unbeliever!" he cried. "Has the boy no care for his own soul?"

"I tell you there's nothing to worry about. I wish to God you'd listen to me. The girl's as good a Christian as most——"

"She has laid a snare for his unwary feet!" protested Lord Maumbury in high quavering tones. "Can men gather figs from thistles even in these latter days? She is a scheming Jezebel who has entrapped him that she may work his utter damnation!—woe unto her; woe, oh, Lord, woe!"

His fanatical outburst drew an expostulation from his companion, who but for some subtle hint of tragedy, would have seen only the ludicrous side of Lord Maumbury's diatribes.

"The girl didn't lure him at all," he said shortly. "If anyone was to blame, it was Demas; not Miss Loveridge."

"Yet she has used her fascinations upon him," said the earl more quietly. He fell back into his chair, white and exhausted, and motioned feebly towards a decanter on the sideboard. The parson rose.

"Not even that," he said. "Demas hasn't married for love. Anything less like a love match I never saw."

Lord Maumbury moistened his blue lips with the brandy. Speech came a little hardly to him now. He leant back with half-closed eyes.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"He had a grudge against the infidel, and married the daughter in order to punish her for her father's sins. A queer story? Very original, I grant. No cut and dried ways of courtship for Master Demas! Though I'm far from commending his action, of course."

Lord Maumbury, whether revived by the spirit or startled into further attention, was sitting up alert enough now.

"You say that he has married—without love—so that he may gratify that worst, vilest, most dangerous of all human passions—the lust for revenge?"

"It looked like it, but——"

"My God, Evurtius!—has he no Christian principles at all?"

"Plenty, at heart, my lord. Don't worry! he'll come out all right."

Lord Maumbury paid no heed.

"Does he not know that—from the indulgence of such base desires—proceed crimes—thefts, arsons, even—murders! Is he so utterly lost to the Divine guidance——"

"Come, come, come," said the parson. "You're taking a jaundiced view of the whole affair. The lad was in the wrong, and thinks so himself by now; still, there's no denying he had great provocation. He suffered an outrage which no young fellow of spirit could be expected to bear without an attempt at reprisals of some sort."

"An outrage?" The hollow eyes burnt brightly again. "What outrage? Go on!"

And Willavize, in a few blunt words, told the story. Before it was well ended, he sprang to the earl's side.

"My lord, my lord!" cried he.

The Earl of Maumbury was lying back, clutching at his breast with a weakening hand. He gave no answer to the other's questioning. . . .

Late that evening the parson passed through the room where Julia Trickett had waited for him. The girl had been sent back to the inn hours ago. He took down the timepiece, ticking softly in the gloom, and held it to the firelight. Three minutes past nine. The lateness of the hour surprised him. Time had passed without audible record from the moment of the earl's seizure to his death, some few minutes ago. The loud-tongued clock in the hall had been stopped by the physician's order, and there was no timepiece in the death-chamber itself. During the long silent period of watching Time had stood still.

Time. Eternity. The easy-going moralist and genial good-liver stayed his going for a full minute, sobered by the chilling sense of responsibility—and blamed himself for lack of care.

" God forgive me, Everard ! " he muttered. " To die like that; and not another word spoken."

Someone looked in. The parson replaced the clock on the shelf.

" Five past nine, doctor," he said. " I didn't know it was so late."

" Nor I ! " returned the other, yawning. " Still, there's time left for a carousal. If you'll come back to the town with me, sir, we'll make a night of it, and get the odour of the cursed drugs out of our nostrils."

But for once in his life Parson Evurtius refused a chair at a convivial board.

X

THE MASKED FACE OF INTRIGUE

With all the revivifying instinct of youth Bathia found moments when she was able to reduce her fears and distractions to a minimum, and to take a healthy pleasure in the momentary liberty which she had gained.

Such a mood held her, cozening her into a false sense of security, when once more events began to move swiftly, threatening a climax. And, surely enough, climax hid behind the skirts of sequacious happening, but of a nature unforeseen at this time.

Into her quiet haven, the perfect peace of which had already been disturbed by Gervis Peverell, there obtruded on a sudden the figure of her husband himself.

Desire for exercise had drawn her one morning from the house. She walked alone—a course recommended by her hostess, who was expecting Felix Peverell. The town was interesting to a stranger, and not of sufficient extent to render an escort necessary. Accustomed to solitude, Bathia rambled here and there, avoiding only the neighbourhood of the quay—that place associated with her first humiliation. To-day, with the warm young blood dancing in her veins, and her bounding grace of motion making its own impetus, she was eager to forget.

Towards the end of the morning she found herself in a strange and melancholy spot—a place from which even the bright clear sunshine of a January day could not banish the influence of death. The girl had turned unthinkingly into what she supposed to be a near way of return to Diana's house, and experienced a sense of chill on discovering that the flagged pathway ran alongside a burial-ground.

No trim graveyard this, with prospect of sunny tower and cool interior of aisle and chancel. Here were only the growth of rank unwholesome grass, rusty railings falling from the perpendicular, heavy altar tombs, and sombre ragged evergreens. The light which struck aslant it from between the neighbouring houses had a thinner paler quality than it carried elsewhere. The few shrivelled leaves which still hung on the distorted boughs moved heavily, though the air was crisp with a smart ruffle of breeze without. And withal the place was solitary, in spite of the fact that it was a public right of way.

Bathia, whose youth and health could only tolerate the thought of death in a poetical or spiritual sense, which had nothing in common with the sober melancholy of this dismal spot, was hurrying, fleeter footed than before, through the depressing locality, when she became aware of an unseen companion in this solitude. The circumstances of the place made her turn her head. Then all her blood stood still. For there, advancing quickly toward her, she saw him—the man who had tricked and betrayed her—her husband, the hero of the mocking marriage, with all the hateful grace of his good looks and air of breeding.

In a moment he was at her side, bare-headed, and with a fine colour in his face. Then he stood before her, silent and motionless. Yet his eyes held hers, so that she could not flee from him a second time.

"What do you want?" she asked faintly. "How dare you follow me?"

"Not from any desire to be troublesome," he answered. "If so, I could have intruded upon you in a far more public manner."

"What has brought you here?" she demanded, her cheek recovering its faded red.

"The wish—surely a natural one!—to see you again."

"Yes, it is natural enough!" she retorted, her fear sheltering behind her high spirit. "You want to consider your work, I suppose. To see how I bear the ignominy of my situation—I had almost said, of your name! But how, in heaven's name, did you know where I was?"

"From Mr. Peverell."

"Ah!" Her fingers tightened on the rusty railings at her side.

"I have been here," Demas resumed, "for more than a week, trying to find an opportunity to speak to you. I have seen you several times out driving, but never alone until this morning."

Bathia looked surprised.

"I have not seen you," she said with a challenging note in her voice.

"Yet you have passed my window frequently," said he. "I am lodging in—— "

Bathia brushed aside the personal details as an impertinence. Her heart was beating quickly. Every moment increased her fear of him; her dislike grew ever more acute.

"You were on the watch, no doubt," said she, and enjoyed the poor triumph of seeing that her tone had stung him.

He threw back his head. The fine lines of his throat and jaw came into prominence.

"I admit it," he said, and added no word of explanation or excuse. He could have told her that her fresh young beauty had made its own appeal to a passionate heart already grown remorseful over her wrongs. Yet, with a new restraint, he said nothing.

Bathia turned from him.

"One moment," he pleaded, and touched her arm. She drew quickly away. "I beg your pardon—Miss Loveridge. I—I have earned that."

"Don't call me so!" she flashed.

He replied slowly.

"I will call you nothing else," he said, "until the day you ask it of me."

"Then," cried Bathia with a suggestion born of the place and its associations, "that name will be written over my grave!"

"You have not relented, then?" he asked.

"Did you waylay me to ask such an unnecessary question?" was her quick retort.

"Not entirely," said Demas; and then stood silent awhile.

His natural tendency being towards the emotional rather than the practical issue of things, he had some difficulty in keeping to his self-destined task. More so because her presence seemed to fill some hitherto unrealized vacuum in his own existence, and he could only see how richly glowed her hair in the sunlight, and how dainty were the curves of her figure in its tightly fitting green pelisse—only remember that once, for a brief half-hour, she had lain almost within his arm, and afterwards fanned a feeble fire into being for his sake with her tender breath. Had she, he wondered, fanned more fires than she was aware of, with that simple action? Could a man come to the knowledge of love in so strange a fashion? Love?—what was it? He thought of the only lover he had ever known; Felix Peverell. And by swift association came another memory:

What's Love, I pray thee tell.
It is that fountain and that well
Where pleasure and repentance dwell;
It is, perhaps, the sauncing bell
That toules all into heaven or hell,
And that is Love, as I've heard tell.

Meanwhile, Bathia was waiting. She was trembling a little now, like a lily swaying inside its green calyx. Observing this, he thought the cause was anger. He was wrong. It was fear.

"Well?" she asked.

"I beg your pardon. You want to know why I have troubled you. It is for this reason. I wish to hear what plans you have made for your future."

"They do not concern you!"

"I think they do."

"Then I refuse to tell you!"

He raised his eyebrows in expostulation. She took it for an implied threat, and grew more wilful still.

"You cannot think," pursued Demas, unconsciously fostering her appreciation of his purpose, "—you surely cannot think that I will let you go out of my life like this. However unlucky our relations are, the fact remains that we have a claim upon each other. After all, you are my wife."

"God help me!" cried she.

Her unashamed antipathy moved his hot blood to anger. He knew himself to be in the wrong; had openly admitted it a dozen times. Yet, in his new mood of nascent tenderness, it irked and hurt him to have the charge flung in his face at every turn.

"We can't remedy matters by talking of what is past," he told her. "It is the future that I am concerned with now. I understand that you are staying with friends of the Peverell family. I hope that you have had no annoyance from—those gentlemen."

"None at all," said Bathia with defiance.

"I'm relieved to hear it! I was afraid they might make themselves unpleasant." Bathia continuing silent, Demas went on, with a new briskness in his voice which brought back her fear: "Of course, we must come to some decision, Miss Loveridge. May I know whether you have heard from your father yet?"

"I do not choose to discuss my affairs with you, sir," Bathia answered coldly. "Unhappily, I am your wife. Let the assurance of that fact suffice you. Believe me, it is humiliation enough to satisfy even you."

"You are very pitiless," he said. "Haven't I endeavoured to prove my——"

She caught him up quickly.

"You have proved nothing," cried she, "but your own unworthiness! If you have no more to say, pray allow me to pass on. You are keeping me from my friends."

He drew back at once, with a mind still sufficiently balanced to be assured of the impossibility of placing either his own friends or his scanty purse at her service.

"I hope you are in good hands," he said.

"At least," she returned, as if answering his thought, "I desire no help from you!"

"Yet," he reminded her, unwise in his miserable situation—and how miserable he was he had hardly known until he had thus forced his presence upon her—"I might claim the privilege as a right."

At that, quite suddenly, her valour left her—left her pale and shaking before him. And he, seeing this, to spare himself the mortification of watching her flee from him a second time, bowed, and turned away without another word. Anger and pride prevented a backward look, and in less than a minute Bathia was again alone among the mouldering gravestones and distorted trees.

Alarm and bewilderment hurried her feet back to her present home. But her spirit had died within her, and she felt very forcibly now that her position was a miserably uncertain one. Other than natural sympathy there was no bond which she could claim from the woman who hitherto had befriended her, and, regarding her equivocal situation more critically, she found that already signs had not been wanting to suggest that her hostess was no longer in the full flush of that generous sentiment. Further proof of this awaited the girl on her return to the house.

She sought Diana incontinently, and came upon that lady in the act of closing the door of an inner room. Breathless, she panted out her news :

" Mrs. Woodland, I have seen my husband ! "

Diana assumed a laboured interest.

" Have you, my dear? How tragic you look ! Well? "

" He—he has threatened me ! "

" Indeed ! How unmannerly ! "

" I believe he means to claim me—to take me away from you ! "

Diana regarded her thoughtfully.

" Well," she said at length, " one can hardly blame him for that. You are very charming, my dear. Quite a beauty, in fact; and would adorn any man's house."

Bathia looked at her amazed.

" But—but, ma'am, I don't want to ! " she stammered.

" Unfortunately," said Diana with a little shrug, " a wife's inclinations are of small account beside a husband's wishes."

" But—— " began the girl.

" And I believe that he can compel you to join him. He can summon the law to his aid."

Bathia stood twisting a handkerchief between nervous fingers. That was what her father had implied; the thing which she had always dreaded. Fitting Diana's words to Demas's actions, she thought that she read the meaning of his apparent acquiescence, his undemonstrative departure, his supposed threatenings. He knew himself to be so much stronger than she that he could afford to give her a few more hours of freedom. It was as though a huntsman should allow his quarry to escape in order to enjoy chasing it down another day.

" If he takes me," she said, " he will be unkind to me. He has told me he intended that. Now he will hate me all the more for leaving him."

The confusion of her statement presented the erring Demas in a worse light than was consonant with the fact, but it failed to touch the sympathy of a jealous woman.

" Oh, my dear, things—even these intolerable husbands of ours—are never quite so unbearable as we think them," consoled the other. " After all, 'tis not as if you loved another man. You may get quite desperately fond of your own particular monster in time."

" Never," said Bathia with determination; and stamped her foot. " Oh, never! "

There were reasons against it, the strongest, from the feminine point of view, being her acceptance of the fact that, had he not deceived her and planned so base a revenge for his own injuries, the thing might have been possible—even easy of fulfilment. The primary attraction had a reactionary influence on the aversion produced by other causes.

The girl's vehemence appeared to amuse her companion.

" Perhaps you had better go back to him before he comes to claim you," she suggested.

Bathia's heart fluttered again.

" But, surely, ma'am, if—if he dared, you'd not give me up? " she gasped.

Diana looked languidly distressed.

" My dear Mrs. Chaldecott," she said, " don't you see that, should such an unfortunate state of things arise, I really should have no choice in the matter? I can't prevent any man from claiming a runaway wife."

Bathia turned away with a kind of humiliated pride.

" I will not trouble your hospitality much longer, madam," she said.

Hearing which, Diana Woodland rejoiced.

Bathia, her buoyant mood now changed to one of depressed bewilderment, went upstairs to her room. In spite of her brave words, she had no plan, nor any instinctive guidance towards one. She was wholly without money or friends, and the only man from whom she could rightfully claim aid in both kinds was also the one to whom such appeal would shame her to the uttermost. Was ever woman, she passionately demanded, in a worse strait?

All of which did not tend to soften her heart towards the offender who had entered her life to such calamitous purpose,

In his repentance she had no belief; of his sincerity, no acceptance. Having been once deceived by him, her faith was broken. The impression remained in her mind with a touch of her father's bigotry; Demas Chaldecott, for all his gentler ways and surface concern for her well-being, was only planning further pains and humiliations for her. Even his act of attempted restoration to her father's house became an additional offence to her inimical mind. What other reason had moved him save the invidious desire to prove to her that, once his wife, she was entirely in his power. The fiasco of non-admittance, if not of his planning, so Bathia assured herself, had been certainly of his foreseeing, and formed another unforgiveable act in the record against him.

With a tragic sense of inefficiency and helplessness she seated herself at the window and looked through the half-opened pane at Diana's garden. A voice—Diana's own—came up to her from below. A moment later, the lady herself, with a male companion, stepped into view immediately below Bathia's eyes.

A sudden unreasonable fear set the girl leaning forward. Then the man removed his hat, and she saw his fair hair. His figure, now that she looked more closely, was unfamiliar. Thank God, he was not her husband! Neither, for that matter, was he Diana's own. He was speaking with some excitement, or it might be, agitation, and his tones were louder than they should have been.

" You have never been quite fair to me, Diana! " he declared. " Even now I'm in doubt as to whether you don't prefer Gervis after all."

" You exquisite fool! How shall I prove to you that you are wrong? "

" Grant me a decent interview! I'm sick to death of five minutes here, a hand pressure there, a glance, a whisper, in other folks' houses."

" But "—this with the very acme of delicate irony—" you have none of your own."

" That's the damnable part of it! If only that racing hussy had behaved herself—— "

The listless Bathia flamed. She had at this moment come to a recognition of her position of eavesdropper, and had been about to withdraw. But the allusion to herself, satisfying a very feminine sense of morality, kept her in her place.

" Poor Felix," said Diana's cooing voice. " I wish I could atone for the creature's deficiency! What shall I do, *caro mio?* "

" Promise to let me see you again! "

" Certainly, if it can be managed. When and where shall it be? "

" Somewhere private, where neither Gervis nor—anyone else is likely to interrupt us."

" It can't be here, then, nor in the daytime," said Diana composedly. " Yes! I'll dare the proprieties, my Felix, for your sake! So never doubt my love again."

" Let me think! " said Felix eagerly. " I go to Parley to-morrow, and return the same day. That is, I can break the journey here on my way to Wyke Regis. And it won't be a bad move either, for the professional horse-snatchers will reckon on my going straight on. I shall stay at *The Antelope*."

"Yes?" said Diana. "You're taking the Gift Horse down to Wyke?"

Felix nodded.

"I've made all the arrangements lower down the road," he said. "Got master-keys of all the principal stables, so that we can slip in quietly anywhere at any time. It might be necessary in case of an attempted theft. I quite anticipate one."

Diana was smiling.

"Are you going, lover of mine," she questioned, "to ask me to meet you in a stable?"

Felix flushed.

"Not precisely," he said. "Only to wait for me there. Not many minutes—on my soul, I swear not for long."

"Please explain," said she.

"There's to be a subscription dance at the inn to-morrow night. Not a very genteel affair, of course. Just among the well-to-do shipping people—masks and all that. I'll get a couple of cards; any name will do. We'll attend, my dear one, and have a heavenly hour together. No one will trouble about us there. But you mustn't run the risk of talk from outside. And if I wait upon you here, or you wait for me in any public place, I'm afraid some busybody might—might——"

"Create a scandal," concluded Diana. The piquancy of the suggestion appealed to her whimsical fancy. After all, why not one brief hour of Felix's devotion before the deluge? For she knew that she could not much longer conceal from him the fact that she had promised her widowed hand to his brother.

"Yes," she said, "I'll come. How brilliant you've grown, Felix *mio!* And once I thought you rather dull and stupid!"

"That was before I met you!" he replied, taking her hand caressingly. "You are an angel to consent to such a rough proposal. I'll get the key and let you have it at once."

"Don't come back here again to-day if you love me!" cried Diana. "Nicholas has been very queer-tempered of late. Bring the key, but leave it in the right-hand urn by the door. And don't come until it is dark."

"I will not," said Felix. "Yes; I see the need for caution, dear one. And I'll get the tickets for the dance at once. It opens at seven. I'll join you at half-past. Will that do?"

"Admirably, my knight of the stable! Now, dearest

Felix, don't look so hurt. If I didn't love you, I'd not come."

Soft passages followed; inaudible to the scandalized girl who had overheard very nearly the whole of the conversation. Then Felix asked :

" In what name shall I get the tickets, my love ? "

Diana thought for a moment. Then a little laugh rippled from her lips.

" Mr. and Mrs. Chaldecott," she said as they moved away.

So for Bathia the conversation ended on the same note with which it had begun—her own name.

Indignation at Diana's unwarrantable liberty warmed her blood. She would not suffer it ! She would not be associated even by proxy with her husband. She would go to this place, this inn, and denounce the lie. She would leave this unfriendly house at once. She would go—Where ?

And at the thought, which brought her back to her starting-point, her anger and bitterness swept into the old channel. Again the shadow of her husband loomed over her, and again her spirit trembled before him. She dropped her purpose of immediately confronting Diana with her proposed deception; she ceased to wonder at the scheme which she had overheard; or to consider her own anomalous position in relation to it. She became involved in a scheme of her own.

The mention of the Gift Horse had carried her mind back to the morning when she had seen that noble animal for herself. That it was also the morning when she had surprised Demas Chaldecott at his evil orisons was a connection which still kept her thoughts within bounds. With the memories came back fragments of the rustics' talk at the inn—further stimulated by Felix Peverell's allusions to a possible attempt to steal the horse while in his charge. But not until the lovers had moved away, and left her to her own desperate thoughts again, did the embryo idea assume shape and vitality. Then, with the natural wonder of an innocent mind set upon its first intrigue, she saw how easy the pair in the garden had made things for her. But against the background of the intricate details she saw standing out the great fact as announced by the rustic at the inn :

The man who stole a horse was sent by the law overseas to a foreign land.

It followed, therefore, that if he, Demas Chaldecott, could be persuaded to steal the horse in Felix Peverell's charge, he would be prevented from carrying out his implied threat of claiming her as his wife.

Could he be so persuaded? Bathia believed so.

Could the thing be managed? She believed that it could.

She thrust her burning face into her palms and thought.

At the root of her scheme, invidious as it might have seemed, lay the instinct of self-preservation alone. She craved the sense of freedom from the lawful authority of this man—a claim which her overwrought mind imagined was hourly drawing near a realization. Here, to her hand, placed there by those two fools in the garden—no friend to her, either of them!—were the means she needed.

No scruple was involved, for she was conscious of none. Her moral sense was disturbed no more than by the suggested thought that Demas Chaldecott might not desire to leave the land of his birth. For in her fatal ignorance, the result of her anomalous education and upbringing, Timon Loveridge's daughter knew less of the conditions of the English law than did the most ignorant lout on her father's land.

That men were hanged for the crime of horse-stealing was a fact of which she had no knowledge. That exile "overseas" meant untold misery to the sufferer was a condition undreamt of in her utter lack of information regarding everyday life. For it was not from Timon Loveridge's great goddess Nature that a simple girl could learn these things. At this crisis of her life, Nature said: Protect yourself. And Bathia blindly sought to obey.

XI

BY LANTHORN-LIGHT

She laid her plans with extraordinary ease for a beginner at the game. First and foremost was the necessity of seeing Demas once more. She remembered that he had spoken of seeing her pass by his lodging. He would probably continue to watch for her. She had, therefore, only to repeat her walk step by step, and keep a sharp lookout, in order to detect him at some window.

The rest was easy. She left the necessary meeting to the morrow, and contented herself for the present with preliminary plans. The subject matter of the interview was of so important a nature, and must be chosen so warily in order to arouse no suspicion, that she would not decide in haste upon her exact means of persuasion. Ideas, schemes, suggestions floated through her brain, but impulse was controlled to a paradoxical extent in a case where it was, in truth, the mainspring of the whole. This girl had been wrecked once already by her fearless confidence. She ran no risk of failing now through a repetition of the virtue.

For the rest of the day she avoided her hostess, and although Diana, absorbed in her own illicit plans, had practically forgotten their unfriendliness of the morning, she was very willing for Bathia to efface herself. There was, therefore, no obstacle in the way of the girl's repeating her solitary walk of a few hours earlier.

Walking leisurely, with an observant lack of self-consciousness, she carefully retraced her steps. Before she had gone far, the thing which she had anticipated happened. At a certain point in the High Street the curtain of an upper window was thrust aside; a dark head was bent forward, and a pair of brilliant eyes gazed down at her from across the way. With no sign of having noticed him, Bathia moved on at the same steady pace. But she took the first near cut back to the Woodlands' house, with the satisfaction of having achieved so much. It was now growing dusk.

Bathia entered the garden, and immediately raked the front windows with anxious eyes. Here and there a shutter was closed already, or a curtain drawn. Of Diana's presence she could detect no sign. The opening of the door for her own admittance gave indisputable assurance. The sound of a pianoforte was evidence of her hostess's occupation elsewhere. Bathia thereupon plunged into subtleties.

"I have forgotten something," she exclaimed. "Don't hold the door for me. I'll return presently."

Unwatched, she walked as far as the gate, turned, and found a hiding-place among the thick leafage of the evergreens. There she waited, trembling with excitement, and grasping in her hand a rusty key which she had bought that afternoon at a broker's shop. In a quarter of an hour's time she heard the iron gate stealthily opened, and was able to distinguish a man's figure coming swiftly along the flagged path towards the house.

A sudden halt, a moment's delay by the side of the door, and he had turned again, retracing his steps with an even greater rapidity than his approach had shown. When the faint echo of the gate's closing had died away, Bathia left her place of concealment, and ran toward the stone urn that stood on the right of the door.

At the bottom of it was lying a small object, wrapped round in a twist of paper. Direction or love-letter, whichever it might be, Bathia had no time to examine it, for even as her hand closed upon it, she caught the sound of a window being gently raised over her head. Instantly she dropped her own key into the receptacle, clutched the one which Felix Peverell had placed there, and crept back to her shadows.

In a couple of minutes the same scene was being acted, more or less in replica, by Diana Woodland. Thus, in a brief space of time, three hands had been dipped into a stone urn to the confusion and entangling of four separate destinies.

Alone in her own room, which she reached in a perfectly open and self-possessed manner, Bathia unfolded the scrap of paper, and after a moment of hesitation read it. As she had half suspected, it indicated a slight change of plan. In a few unemotional words, Felix Peverell requested his lady to defer the appointment for one hour. The fact made no noticeable difference to her own plans, and Bathia would have returned the written message to the urn, had Diana not already possessed herself of the false key. As it was, the lady would have to wait for her lover. That was all.

Tossing the paper aside, Bathia wrote a message of her own. In it she requested Demas Chaldecott to meet her the next day at the same spot and hour as had witnessed their interview of that morning. This note she despatched by a servant who was incapable of reading the name on the outside.

The following day found more friendly relations outwardly established between herself and her hostess. The reason for this lay in the fact that either woman had had her mind drawn off from the other, and was occupied with her own immediate plans. With the more attractive personality of Felix looming upon her emotional horizon, Diana was content to let her jealousy on account of Gervis lie in abeyance until circumstances forced her to resume it. Bathia, no longer dreading her hostess's power to hand her over to her husband, bent her dignity to a half-hearted acceptance of the other's toleration.

On her arrival at the appointed place, she found Demas already there. He came towards her with a look of eager inquiry, which sobered to an expression of disappointment beneath the chilliness of her greeting. But he stood before her bare-headed, with an air humble enough in one of his natural spirit.

"I have sent for you, Mr. Chaldecott," said Bathia, "because, in my present unhappy situation, I have some right to look to you for help."

"Every right," he agreed.

Bathia frowned.

"My appeal to you," said she, "does not imply any alteration in my feelings. You must understand that."

"I will accept your statement," replied he. "What can I do for you, Miss Loveridge?"

"A very simple thing. Provided I can count on your service without being asked for unnecessary explanations."

He flushed darkly under the mordacious quality of her tones, but her simplicity had led her into the path of wisdom, for his pride rose at once to the challenge.

"I shall not require any explanation, I assure you," he said. "You need only tell me what you wish me to do."

Bathia produced the key of the stable door from her muff, and held it out.

"Am I to take this?" he asked.

"If you will."

He pocketed it at once, and waited, saying nothing more. Bathia continued:

"It is the key of the stables at *The Antelope*."

"Very good," said Demas. "What am I to do with it?"

"Use it," said Bathia. "To-night. You will find a horse inside—a cream-coloured horse. Bring him out, and take him a mile down the Dorchester road. Then wait there until someone comes."

"At any special spot?"

"Near the first milestone out of the town," said Bathia, at random.

"I see," said Demas. But he spoke doubtfully, and remained looking at her in obvious perplexity. She flashed into temper.

"Are not my instructions clear enough?" she demanded. "What do you wish to know?"

"Nothing, of course, that you don't wish to tell me," he answered, his handsome face still clouded with uncertainty. "Only——"

"As I thought!" cried Bathia in anger that needed no simulation, and looking very beautiful in her annoyance.

"No—you wrong me!" said the appreciative young man at her side. "Tell me nothing, since you don't desire to. God knows, I owe you service of some sort!"

Bathia swept the old argument aside with a fine gesture. Her prejudiced mind still refused to accept the sincerity of his regret. Humble or masterful, considerate or passionate, he was only so, according to her conception, for his own purposes. Even now, doubtless, he was calculating how much accumulated power would be his by reason of this obligation under which she was placing herself. But, lest his resolve should grow cautious at the last moment, she thought it wiser to vouchsafe some vague account of her reasons. And she did so with a sarcastic admixture of truth and fiction which marked a great difference between the intriguing wife and the unloved maid.

"The fact is, I am leaving Mrs. Woodland's shortly. She uses the stables occasionally, you must understand. And the key has been granted by special permission of the landlord. There are reasons, into which I cannot go at present, why I do not ask one of Mrs. Woodland's servants, or the ordinary ostlers, to perform this service for me."

Demas raised his hand.

"You needn't say anything more," he told her. "I will do as you ask. Are there any further instructions?"

Bathia mentally reviewed her scheme.

"Don't go there before a quarter to nine," she directed. "Remember, not earlier!"

"A quarter to nine, to-night. Yes, I understand. What else?"

"I think there is nothing else," said she, after another moment of cool reflection.

"Then," said Demas slowly, "we part again."

"Yes—again," answered she. "No matter of regret to me, I promise you!"

"You claim my service, yet you give few thanks," he said.

"I have little to thank you for," she retorted. "Must I always remind you of that?"

He looked at her, frowning slightly, his masterful impulses warring with his new-born humility. It was inevitable that he should recall the morning when she had made her timid maidenly appeal to his consideration and sympathy, and he had hardened his heart to repulse so much winning tenderness.

"Good-bye," he said.

As always, the sound of his voice drew her gaze to his face. Looking at it now, she was startled. Something of the emotions which he was endeavouring to conceal had sprung unconsciously into his eyes. She read desire in them, and thought it was the desire to master and to harm, the desire of hate; in reality it was but the yearning of an awakening, but as yet unrealized, love.

She shrank away, and left him in some haste, without returning his farewell. He remained where he was until she was out of sight. Then he made his way back to his lodgings, with the dull ache of his remorse grown to a sharp stabbing pain that pierced heart and mind alike.

Of his fair one's duplicity he had no suspicion. The reason, when he turned from the contemplation of Bathia herself, seemed simple enough. She was bent on leaving the town, and Mrs. Woodland had lent her aid to a secretive departure. Demas had not spent a week in the town without hearing of both Diana's wedded unhappiness and the attentions of Gervis Peverell. Probably, he judged, his own newly-made enemy was at the bottom of Bathia's unusual mode of leaving her hostess—or Nicholas Woodland, with his cantankerous ways, ever running contrary to his wife's desire. But, of a truth, the penitent young man, who had thrown into that penitence all the ardour which he brought to bear upon every circumstance of his life, did not overburden himself with supposititious reasons for his lady's conduct. The enigma presented by his first association with femininity was in itself too absorbing and alluring to admit of mere curiosity as to the motives that influenced the outward acts of that bewildering personality.

He was stirred anew to a feeling of responsibility. He had soon ceased to think of her as of something belonging to him. But with increasing tenderness came a deepening of the sense of her claim upon his care, his protection, his assistance in any form. That she would accept voluntarily no more than she had asked, he understood well enough. Yet her present dependent position must irk her hourly. The thought pressed heavily upon him. All day he sought the means to remedy her humiliating situation. His own resources were not large. Since the days of his independence he had saved little. His earnings had been small, eked out though his wages had been by the occasional penning of love-letters for dairymaids and composing of epitaphs for county families. Moreover, he had always found money easy to spend. A trifling legacy had come to him from his maternal grandfather, but from Lord Maumbury or Parson Willavize he had seldom received monetary marks of favour. Of personal property he possessed nothing. Reckoning up his present capital, he judged it to fall a little short of thirty pounds. During the day he paid a visit to a lawyer, and arranged that two-thirds of this sum should be placed in Bathia's hands as soon as possible. In order to ensure her acceptance, he stipulated that the gift should be ascribed to her father, and must be received without any personal acknowledgment to its alleged source.

With that much distress removed from his mind, he returned to his rooms to wait until the hour when he must start for the inn. When he left the house some time later he found it to be a dark inclement night of wind and intermittent rain. The High Street was nearly deserted; only here and there a shop-window showed a faint glimmer, or an ale-house threw the glow of its crimson-curtained bar athwart the shiny footway. With his coat-collar turned high and his hat jammed down over his brows, Demas passed rapidly along the street. A constable, going grumblingly on his rounds, gave him good-night as he neared the end of his walk. Demas raised his head to answer, and brought his noticeable face into the light of a wall-flare as he did so.

"What's going on here?" he asked, indicating the inn. For a small crowd was collected near the main door, and the windows were bright spots in the darkness of the night.

"A dancen randy," was the reply. "Better be inside wi' they than stumpen and traipsen it out-along wi' I, young man."

"Not in my line, I'm afraid," said Demas, and was passing on when he paused to ask if the man knew the time.

The constable lugged out a turnip-faced watch, and held it to the light of the flare.

"Jus' on a quarter to nine, young feller," he said. "Plen'y o' time to reely this side o' medneäght, if you've a mind."

"I haven't," said Demas, who had put the question to save himself the inconvenience of unfastening his greatcoat and disinterring his own repeater.

The dance being a purely local affair, involving no travelling from long distances, the stable yard was dark and quiet enough. Apparently, the excitements within the house had drawn the inmates away from the back premises. Demas stumbled forward towards a tiny ray of light suspended some four or five feet from the ground. As he guessed, it was a stable lanthorn. He took it down, and made a survey of the place.

Out-buildings, in various stages of dilapidation, ran along two sides of the yard, but set among these and facing the domestic quarters of the inn itself, was a comparatively new stable, with stout doors heavily padlocked. In the intense quietude Demas could hear the soft breathing and occasional stamping that told of equine occupation.

With the deliberate ease natural to his imperception of any lawlessness in his conduct, or danger to himself, he took out the key and fitted it into the lock, raising the lanthorn in his other hand. As the wards fitted into their place, a slight rustle in the rear caught his attention. With no sense of alarm he turned, and saw a dim shape emerging out of the gloom. The lanthorn's rays fell across a woman's skirt.

"*Caro mio*," said a soft voice caressingly, "that was a sorry trick you played me, lover of mine."

At her first approach Demas had had a wild hope that she might be Bathia. The blood had rushed to his cheek, and before he had done more than wonder why this should be so, he was conscious of another emotion, illuminating the first.

This woman had mistaken him for someone else, for whom was that gentle raillery, that seductive tone. Thank God, despite his disappointment, that she was not Bathia! Her contempt, her aversion, her coldness—all these he could bear. An open avowal of affection for another man would have turned his humility before her into something hot and rebellious and torturing to himself. In that moment he understood as clearly as though the lanthorn which he now raised to the woman's face had thrown a ray of light across his own wild heart.

So, with all his bewildering emotions confused and struggling in his face, he showed himself to Diana Woodland, and she saw that he was not her lover.

For one moment either looked at the other, and Demas's expression became in some degree reflected on Diana's face.

"Madam?" said he, lowering his arm.

"I beg your pardon," she murmured, falling back. And seemed at a loss for further words.

"Can I do anything for you?" he asked.

"No," she answered sharply, from the shadows "—no."

Into the silence came another sound. Someone was entering the yard from the street. He came forward with an uncertain shuffling step, fell over a bucket, swore drunkenly, and stumbled on.

Demas heard the woman at his side breath deeply.

"Open that door—quick!" she whispered. "Wait—put out the light!"

Her bewildering directions made him hold his hand. While he did so, the man continued to advance. Now he stopped to bawl out his wife's name.

"Dian'! Ah! my beauty—got ye at last!"

With a little sibilant cry Diana fled. But her light cloak caught the yellow glow of the dangling lanthorn and gave some clue as to her direction. Instantly the stumbling footsteps followed her. Demas watched, silent and motionless.

He heard her fling herself against the opposite side of the yard, and utter a betraying gasp as she struck a solid wall. Recovering herself, she ran across the paved square, and burst open a crazy door lower down. The sudden slamming of it seemed to shake the night. The next moment the pursuer was at Demas's side, hissing foul words in his ear.

"You're mistaken! " he cried in anger, roughly shaking the other off. "God knows whom you take me for, but I tell you I'm not the man you think! I know nothing of your wife! Look at me, you fool—now are you satisfied?"

He flooded his face once again with the yellow rays, and the besotted brain of old Nicholas Woodland at length accepted the testimony of his drink-bleared eyes. He relaxed his shaking grasp of the young fellow's sleeve, and still muttering incoherent curses and accusations stumbled on his way. A few seconds afterwards Demas heard him pushing open the door behind which Diana was sheltering. With a shrug of his shoulders, he returned to his own task, reckoning that he had dawdled over his lady's errand long enough.

Within the stable, although it was fitted to accommodate relays of horses, he found only one animal—a beautiful creature of creamy-white, the very quintessence of equine excellence. His admiration held him at gaze for a minute or more. Truly, Mrs. Woodland had an enviable possession in this superb animal. And as certainly it was due to his lady's fatal prowess in the saddle that she permitted so valuable a steed to be loaned to a comparative stranger.

He pictured Bathia in her place upon that silky back, riding lightly as a feather, more foam-like than ever by reason of her milky-skinned mount. How gallantly would she take the road with this beneath her! Would she be pleased that he had carried out her wishes so faithfully? Would she thank him in those tender appealing tones which had fallen upon his dull ears in the early hours of his wedding morning? Perhaps she might give him her hand—allow him to place her in her saddle, and settle the stirrup to her liking. He drew his fingers down the shining neck, certain that Bathia would repeat the action presently, and the Gift Horse turned mild eyes upon him and whinnied under his hand.

The harness he found hanging near by. He fitted it on, and with no undue caution led the horse out of the stable. The lanthorn was still swinging at his side, but only Diana Woodland, peering fearfully from a half-opened door, saw him go.

XII

THE ICY HAND

WHEN Diana burst into the unlocked outbuilding she found herself in a large gloomy place of dilapidation and decay. The atmosphere reeked with the musty aroma of mouldering straw and damp leather. Her eyes, grown accustomed to the darkness by reason of her waiting in the yard, could make out a large mass standing in the middle of the surrounding space. Evidently this was a disused coach-house, with an antiquated carriage left to its decay therein. Penetrating a little farther, she found that the place possessed an upper storey or loft. In one corner a ladder-like flight of wooden steps gave access to this by means of a trap-door. At the foot she paused, listening.

The blood was still hot in her cheek, and her heart was pounding furiously. Such an ending to her escapade she had not anticipated. But looking back upon the previous events of the evening, she saw now small indications that should have acted as warnings.

Nicholas had been unusually fretful all day; he had pestered her with repeated questions about the Peverells; he had scarcely allowed her out of his sight. At dinner he had drunk considerably less than usual, and had resented her tart replies with a spirit beyond his wont. He had not evinced his customary desire for bed early in the evening, but had kept her at the pianoforte until the time of her appointment with Felix had passed.

Fuming inwardly at the delay—unaware as she was of her lover's alteration of the hour—Diana had not dared to leave the house until Nicholas was safe in his room. She remembered now, as she stood shivering in the darkness, that he had refused the accustomed services of his man, and had locked the door in his face.

As soon as the house was quiet, Diana had dressed herself for the ball, hiding her moderate glories beneath a cloak, and prepared to disguise her personal charms with a velvet mask. Then, with deep satisfaction that her guest kept to her room, she had stolen away for an hour's happiness in the warmth of Felix Peverell's devotion.

And now—this!

She cursed him bitterly in her heart—this cunning old dotard who had been watching her all the time, luring her into a false sense of security, laying a trap for her half-contemptuous lack of ultra-precaution where he was concerned.

It was easy now to understand his actions, both witnessed and unobserved. He had crept after her—how her heart raged at the indignity!—he had followed step by step in the darkness, never allowing her suspicion to be aroused until he had tracked her to the meeting-place. But for that unlucky chance due to Felix's incredible carelessness of providing her with the wrong key, she would have been safe from his prying eyes behind the locked stable door before that other man, the stranger, had arrived. And Felix himself—why had he not put in an appearance yet?

What a poor luke-warm lover was that who failed to be at the trysting-spot at the appointed hour! Heavens above!—did he love her at all that he could keep her waiting in a wind-swept stable yard in a dancing-dress and satin shoes? Like a stab of pain another thought followed swiftly on the heels of her last: supposing he were to come now?—now, while that aged fool and traitor yet lurked leering in a corner, waiting for her to show herself again!

She crushed her hands together, and stamped her foot into the mouldy straw, agonized with rage. Ah, God, what fools men were! Was Felix, who had sworn a hundred times that he loved her, bent on ruining her utterly? In a flash she saw all things that she valued being swept away—reputation, comfort, the Peverell wealth, the Maumbury coronet. With twisted lips she set herself to keep back the cry of desperation that was bursting from her heart.

And then the door swung inwards, and she knew that he had found her.

Before his wavering step had reached the bottom of the wooden stairs, Diana was at the top. She clambered through the gaping mouth of the trap-door, and sprang into the loft above. Nicholas, with the chuckle of a Silenus, followed, climbing laboriously, hand over hand, with the motions of an animal.

Diana threw a wild glance round her new environment. Here was no cover of any sort. The only chance of protection was suggested by the double doors which lay on either side of the aperture. She gripped the nearest one with a desperate strength, but had only succeeded in raising it a few inches from the ground when her husband's head, vaguely visible in the obscurity, rose on a level with her feet. As she sprang aside, letting the door fall back into its dusty repose, he scrambled up the last stairs, and stood by her side.

A lean hand gripped her wrist, hot breath stung her cheek, and a hoarse voice penetrated piercingly into her very brain.

"Which of 'em is it? Which of 'em is it?" he hissed. "Who gave ye the horses and the di'monds, my beauty, eh? Not old Nicholas—not your lawful husband—no! You told me they was legacies. I know better now. Come!—his name! By God, I'll have it, if I choke the life out o' ye first, you —— "

The epithet, earned by her indiscretion, but unwarranted none the less by facts, stung her to frenzy. She wrenched her wrist free, and stepped back. She could dimly discern his distorted body quivering on the edge of the aperture. A sudden thrusting out of her lithe young arm, and he no longer stood there to insult and mock her—he had gone, vanished beneath her line of vision into the darkness below. She heard him strike the stairway in his fall—a dull faint thud—no moan, no cry—nothing. Silence. . . . Oh, God! . . .

Within a few minutes she was craning forward on her knees, tense fingers gripping the edge of the upper floor on either side. Down below all was very dark and quiet. Her faculties began to reassert themselves. She slid one slippered foot over the opening and found the stair.

Soundlessly she groped her way down. At the bottom her slipper sank into something soft. At first she took it to be the sodden straw that littered the place below. But it encumbered her foot somewhat heavily, and in freeing it she came into contact with another object, solid and motionless, from which she recoiled quickly with a shudder of dread.

Then all at once the whole place seemed alive with sound. Still dark, inpenetrably so in the distant corners, yet full of rustlings and faint noises. Her breath, given forth in quick gasps, returned upon her own cheek and throat, and startled her with the sense of an unseen presence. Her feet seemed treading among unutterable things. She struck herself against the moulding old coach, and felt no pain, only the shock of a possible discovery. But she won to the doorway at last, and raised trembling fingers to the latch. HE had left it unfastened, and a grey streak was drawn like a pencil mark at the point where the two doors met. She knew that the rusty hinges would betray her departure, and for a moment she waited fearfully.

Sounds, more positive than the ghostly creakings and muttering behind her, drew her thoughts out into the yard. She remembered the strange young man with the lanthorn, and while she was remembering, a noise near at hand, commonplace, familiar, struck on her shrinking ear.

It was no more than the clatter of a horse's hoofs in the paved yard outside. Yet it told her of a great escape, an imminent risk safely averted. Very cautiously she drew the door back a few inches and peered out. The sound was in retreat; thank heaven for that!

A speck of light swung in the darkness, illuminated a cream-coloured haunch, was raised, and assumed a stationary position a few feet from the ground. Thence, for a brief moment, it gleamed dully upon an upraised face that burnt itself into her brain, as an everlasting memory. Then, footsteps across the yard, the clatter resumed, and man and horse went away. Again—silence. . . .

All night she lay in hot-eyed wakefulness waiting for that silence to be broken. Through her weary brain pictures passed continuously; pictures of the past and of the future. She feverishly reckoned up the chances against discovery and found them reassuring.

No one had seen her leave the house—save he, whose final intrusion into her life she tremblingly awaited—no one had seen her return. Apparently, she had not been missed. Mrs. Chaldecott, she was told, had not left her room all the evening. Nicholas was supposed to be still in his. The valet could testify to his locking himself in at eight o'clock. Felix would believe she had been prevented from coming; they had not met. Her intended presence at the ball was a secret in their joint keeping. Even the tickets, she recollected, had been taken in a false name. After all, why should she be so fearful? What was there to connect her with that object lying so still and quiet in the darkness of a coach-house in a stable-yard?

Only one thing.

The man with the lanthorn.

In the grey of the dawn she acknowledged it, covering her eyes with a moan.

There lay the crux of her danger. That man with the memorable face. Ah, dear God, how much he knew! . . .

Morning found her more composed. She rose as usual, met Bathia with a smile, and invited her to drive out, later. Bathia refused. She preferred, she said, to walk alone. Diana watched her go, envying her the freedom of the streets, into which she herself did not dare to venture lest she should meet a messenger, a procession—something, she scarcely formulated the hideous dread even in her own mind.

Noon arrived, and now no longer could she keep up the pretence of believing that her husband was still in his room. She summoned the valet and questioned him. The man, it appeared, had made two attempts to enter the room. It remained locked and no reply had been given.

"Ah! It happened so once before, before your time. We had to force the lock. We must do so again. Hark! what is that?"

"Someone has called, I think, ma'am."

Diana recovered herself.

"Is that all? A deal of talking! Well, go and do as I say, and if anything is wrong, let me know at once."

Her control of herself was admirable, but the next instant it was put severely to the test by the hasty and unannounced entrance of Felix Peverell. With difficulty Diana refrained from springing up. But in a moment she was far more composed than he.

Felix waited until the man had closed the door behind him. Then he advanced quickly, holding out both hands. Diana grasped them, and allowed some natural concern to colour her greeting.

"Felix! Good heavens, how strange you look!"

It was no exaggeration. His face was pale, his eyes bright under gloomy brows; his hair lay wet upon his temples, his hands shook. The dust and stains of hard riding were upon him, and the discoloration of a recent blow disfigured one cheek.

"May I sit down? Thank you. Such a night as I've had!—Diana."

"Indeed, it would appear so! What has happened? Something serious, I am afraid."

"Serious? By heavens, yes. Can you give me a taste of brandy? I don't know how I feel this morning. Shaken all to pieces, I think."

"You look it," she rejoined with genuine sympathy. She fetched the spirit decanter from the sideboard, and helped him generously. He gulped the liquor down, and pulled himself together.

"I ought, I know, to apologize for coming to you like this," he said then, speaking more steadily. "But my errand is my excuse. The fact is . . ." He paused, and Diana eagerly threw a remark into the silence.

"I, too, have been rather disturbed this morning," she said. "Nicholas has locked himself into his room, and we shall have to break the door open. He has done so before . . . often."

"Has he?" Felix's manner showed a little constraint. "Diana, I—I came to—to speak of—him."

"Yes?" She smiled almost brightly. She could feel the warm blood tingling in her cheek and was glad of it. " I was going to explain. Please don't interrupt, dear love. After all, 'tis I who owe the apology, and I'm sure you are thinking so. I could not come last night—as, of course, you know ! " She laughed outright, but feverishly. " But please do not blame me for that. 'Twas not my fault ! Nicholas was very disagreeable all the evening, and though he went to his room at eight o'clock—I believe it was at eight; the servants will know—I was in dread lest he should appear again, for he hadn't summoned his man. And by the time I was quite certain that he really had retired for the night, the weather was much too rough for me to venture, even for your dear sake. Perhaps you noticed how hard it rained after eleven last night ? "

Felix suddenly rose, his face grown very grave and stiff. He walked to the window, away from her, and answered her from there.

" Yes, I did notice it. . . . I was out in it," he said.

Diana sprang up with a little cry of contrition, and followed him.

" Oh, Felix *mio*," she said, " you make me very remorseful. Out in all that rain—for my sake ! Did you wait for long ? "

" I—I was not out in the rain because of you," he said, the constraint in his manner becoming yet more marked. " I am glad that . . . you did not come. For I, too, was unable to keep the appointment."

Diana smiled her relief. Here then, thought she, was the explanation of his very obvious self-consciousness.

" Oh, false lover ! " she cried. " If I had gone, how long must I needs have waited ? At half-past seven, you said."

He glanced round quickly.

" At half-past eight," he corrected. " As I told you in my note, I found it would be impossible to—— "

" What note ? " she questioned in vague alarm. " Felix, I had no note from you."

He explained. Diana drew back to her chair by the fire. What significance this discovery had she hardly knew as yet. But at least here was a definite connecting of herself with the inn-yard last evening. She stirred the fire, shivering.

" I did not get your letter," she said.

Felix raised his eyebrows, nodded to himself, and appeared to dismiss the matter from his mind. He came slowly towards her.

" Never mind my doings last night," he said then.

"They seem very unimportant compared with—other things."

"What things?" she forced herself to ask.

"The thing I came to tell you. . . ." He stood with his hands behind him, looking down upon her. "Diana, your husband was found in the yard of *The Antelope* early this morning. Dead."

The blood dyed her cheek. With an effort she met his eyes.

"Dead?" she repeated. "Nicholas—at *The Antelope*—dead?"

"Yes."

"Where? How?"

"They found him lying in the old coach-house. At the foot of the loft staircase. The trap was open. His neck was broken."

The short passionless sentences brought the known facts home to the woman who listened, with the quality of a revelation. It was no mere affectation or pose that caused her to cover her face with her hands and cry out:

"Then I am free! Thank God, I am free!"

Had she been looking at him she would have seen that her companion's face twitched with pain.

"Yes," he agreed dully. "You are . . . free."

There was a short pause. Then Diana looked up.

"'Twould be the basest hypocrisy," she declared, "to pretend that I am sorry. With you, at any rate, I can be honest, dear heart. These are good tidings that you have brought; not ill. Why did you dread telling me so much?"

Felix's handkerchief came into play. He wiped dry lips with it, looking gloomily on the floor.

"I haven't told you all my news yet," he answered. "I had a hard night of it, and I suppose that has upset me."

"Yes? What else has happened?" she asked a little fearfully.

"My lord's horse, the Gift Horse, was stolen last night," said he.

"Ah! then I know——" With a gasp she checked herself in time. God! what had she nearly said? She glanced at Felix. Had he supplied the unuttered words? His face betrayed nothing. She ran on quickly. "I know how that must have troubled you," was her substituted sentence. "Have—have you caught the man?"

"There were three of them," Felix told her. "No, they got off clear, but they left the horse when they found the game was up, so no real harm was done. But it meant a stiff and a long chase for me and my fellows for several hours."

"Tell me about it," urged she, eager to distract his mind from the more tragical issue of the previous night. In a few unemotional sentences he told. His manner was that of a man who speaks of one thing while another is vexing his mind.

"I got the horse stabled all right, and told the men to be on guard at nine o'clock. I went to the yard shortly before the hour, and found some fellows there. Like a fool—a lovesick fool, I suppose!—I took them for men belonging to the place. I waited inside the inn for a little while, and when I went back again, the place was empty, the stable door half-open, and the horse gone. I roused an alarm at once and we were off in three minutes. I hated leaving you in the lurch like that, but I hoped you would have learned enough from our uproar to understand what had happened. But, of course, you knew nothing—since you weren't there. . . ."

"No, I wasn't there! Go on."

"We had a long hard ride of several hours, but got news of the ruffians at length, and came up with 'em at daybreak. There was a bit of a brush with the hindermost, then they all made off, and the fellow who was holding my lord's horse bolted with the rest. Then we came back again, and . . ."

Once more his troubled eyes rested on her face. Once more she plucked up spirit in spite of many fears.

"And they told you of my husband's death?" suggested she, for his sentence had no ending.

"No. Not at once. It wasn't known. You see, the old coach-house is seldom used. The swinging door. . ." Again he paused, and then went back on his own words. "No. I'd only just got back—about nine o'clock it was—when Gervis came in."

"Gervis? To see you?" Her quick instincts were alert again. Had the brothers quarrelled? Had the elder learnt of her innocent intrigue with Felix? "Go on, please!" she urged.

"He came to tell me that he'd been summoned to Wyke Regis. My lord died last night."

Diana's eyes glowed. She looked at the speaker with parted lips.

"Your uncle is dead?" she breathed. "At last? Then Gervis is the Earl of Maumbury!"

"Yes," said Felix, in a passionless voice. "He has gone down to Wyke."

"Did he give you any message for me?" Diana asked eagerly.

"I forget," said Felix in tones as hard as her own.

Diana rested her chin in her palm and gazed into the fire.

"The Earl of Maumbury!" she repeated, as if to herself. Her lips curved slowly into a reflective smile. Felix Peverell turned suddenly away as if the sight hurt him.

Diana recollected his presence, and roused herself. She held out her hand. After a moment's hesitation, he took it.

"Diana," he faltered.

"Poor Felix!" sighed she. Yet laughter was not far behind her sympathy—the selfish laughter of one careless of another's pain. "You take your disappointment well," she added.

"I'm not disappointed," he answered, letting her hand fall. "I never expected to be the earl."

She waited, prepared for a passionate pleading for her fidelity, for earnest protestations of his own. She nerved herself to tell him of the hopelessness of his devotion, of her promise, now ready for fulfilment, to his brother. But no need arose for any ordeal of that kind, for Felix was quietly collecting his hat and gloves, ready to depart. She sat looking at him in wonder. Was he so cut to the heart by his perception of his utter lack of chances that he could not trust himself to speak of it?

"I am going to Wyke," he announced, standing before her once more—standing awkwardly, like a delinquent schoolboy rather than a citizen of the fashionable world. He was fumbling in his pocket as he spoke. Diana rose.

"It was very good of you to come and break the tragic news to me," said she.

A wave of colour swept across his face. He did not meet her eyes. His hand was still inside his coat pocket.

"I didn't come altogether for that," he said. "I had something to bring—to give you. . . . I've forgotten where I found it. And I shouldn't have brought it at all only—I thought you might miss it, and wonder who had picked it up—and be troubled, because of it. I hope you know me well enough to be certain that I—here it is!"

He thrust something into her hand, muttered a hasty "Good-bye," and left her without a backward look.

Diana stood staring at the thing which he had given her. It was a little velvet mask, and on the inside, worked in a silver thread, she read her own name.

PART III

THE SAUNCING BELL

"I was only the whipped cur to you always, and my heart was not worth the trouble of breaking."

I

WHERE PLEASURE AND REPENTANCE DWELL

Demas left the inn in the same open manner which had characterized his proceedings throughout the evening. By no great stretch of paradox it might be supposed that to this lack of precaution was due his immunity from immediate discovery. Undoubtedly, the quality of the night helped him. As the hour grew later the blackness overhead increased, and the gusty wind became more violent. The street, away from the scene of festivity, was nearly deserted, and when he got out upon the Dorchester road he might have been travelling along a highway specially prepared for the midnight flight of a horsestealer.

According to Bathia's instructions, he had not far to go. He proceeded at a leisurely pace, for although she had mentioned no particular hour at which he was to be relieved of his charge, he assumed that her messenger or herself must needs follow his own direction. At the most, he would be overtaken short of the appointed spot.

He was walking the animal, wrapped up in a horse-cloth which he had found, but wearing no harness save a headstall, to which a long leading-rein was attached. Saddle of any sort he had failed to find. This was attributable to the fact that Felix Peverell had cautiously stabled his own mount, and those of the earl's servants, elsewhere. Demas was therefore on foot, unsuspicious of anything unusual in his situation, and consequently unaware that danger of any sort threatened him. Moreover, his mind was full of her who had bidden him to her service for this one night, of Bathia, with her glistening curls and scornful eyes—of Bathia, with her soft lips that spoke such bitter things, with all her proud young beauty that he might not claim.

Thus, when nearly at the end of his short journey he heard behind him the drumming of hoofs, he found nothing untoward in the circumstance. He paused in his own tracks, with a deepened emotion, and cursed the darkness that bade fair to rob him of the sight which his mind had envisioned for him ever since he had set out on his errand. The oncoming sounds approached fitfully to his hearing, for the wind continued to blow sudden gusts, and at intervals was accompanied by a heavy downpour of rain. With lowered head he went forward, proceeding more quickly now, lest after all he should come second to the meeting-place and keep his lady waiting. In another lull of the elements he heard the hoofbeats only a few yards away.

A shapeless bulk loomed up over him, divided, and re-formed itself. For a moment he was blinded by the sudden opening of a lanthorn. The light, after flashing across his eyes, was turned upon the horse which he was leading.

"Right, by jimminy!" cried a voice. And while the rein was wrenched out of his hand someone dealt him a smart crack across the head. He staggered giddily. Another blow put him out of the reckoning without loss of time, and as he went down the horsestealers shut the lanthorn and made off with their booty.

When he came to himself, with no certainty as to the passage of time, it was merely to feel a sick consciousness that some disaster had befallen, and to sink back into insensibility again. This happened more than once. He found it impossible to rise. Every effort produced a vertigo which continued endeavour deepened into faintness. He had no choice but to lie where he was, in a state of semi-consciousness, until help arrived, or his strength was recovered.

All through the night Bathia kept him company—a visionary Bathia, kinder than he had known, with all the appealing tenderness which had softened her first hours with him deepened into something less timid and more assertive, something compassionate and reassuring. So that he forgot her recent coldness, and remembered her scorn no more. When the wind tossed his hair across his forehead he fancied it was the caress of her fingers, cool and white and strong. When the raindrops drenched his cheek, he thought they were her tears. Did she weep for herself, this revelation of a Bathia, or in divinest pity that her service had led him into so evil a mischance? Nay—no mischance at all, but a very welcome happening, since it had brought her in such sweet mood to his side.

Was that a bell ringing somewhere? Who should sound a bell in the dead of a winter's night? Yet how clearly the notes rang through his head, so that his very heart pulsated to the same sweet tune. A bell? He remembered that Bathia had had no wedding peal. Why did they ring it now? It hammered into his brain intolerably. And ever he was certain, at the back of his sick mind, that there was an explanation, if only a man might find it. In a moment of saner thought he lit upon the connection.

It is, perhaps, that sauncing bell,
That toules all into heaven or hell:
And this is Love, as I heard tell.

Love! Was this love? Why, then indeed the old poets were right. It was more misery than bliss. And yet . . . and yet . . . Oh, love Bathia! . . .

He opened his eyes and found himself back in his lodgings. The distress of the night was over; his head was clear, his thoughts coherent; and the storm had passed. With a sense of relief he made a mental survey of his position. The result was productive of less satisfaction.

First in importance he ranked the fact that he had failed in the service that he had undertaken. Bathia would have an added reason for her contempt and distrust. He must see her at once. Perhaps she might be moved to deal leniently with a fault which had already brought its own punishment. At any rate, he would see her. That fact would compensate for all else. He lay in a glow of anticipation, lost to all other considerations awhile. And so strong did the desire become that presently he rose and began to dress.

He felt weak and shaken; stiff and sore as well. A glance in the mirror showed himself to be pale and heavy-eyed. There were no marks of the violence which he had sustained, for the blows had fallen upon the thick masses of his hair, which now concealed any bruise or cut that might disfigure the flesh beneath. By moving very cautiously and refreshing himself with copious draughts of water, he found that it was possible to attire himself for the street. This he had just succeeded in doing when his landlady came into the room, and partial enlightenment as to the various happenings of the past night followed.

He learnt that he owed his rescue to Felix Peverell, who, returning from his pursuit of the horsestealers, had come upon him lying helpless in the road. Felix had ascertained his place of residence, and had had him conveyed to it, without delay. But in hearing this fact Demas was made aware of another which excelled it in importance. The story of the attempted theft of Lord Maumbury's Gift Horse was talked of all through the town, and at last the perception of his personal danger assailed the young man. Of his danger, but not of the manner in which he had been thrust into it.

His mind leapt to the conclusion that in endeavouring to carry out Bathia's wishes he had fallen into an almost fatal mistake. The thought of the peril which the intervention of the genuine thieves had so narrowly averted brought him up sharply, with a wincing of his sensitive spirit, and induced a graver mood. He listened without comment to the woman's story, and as soon as he could dismissed her, that he might go to Bathia and suffer, should it please her, the torment of her reproaches for his stupidity.

On the whole, now that the shock of the discovery has passed, the thought of his failure troubled him more than any suspicion that his danger was not yet over. True, if an explanation was demanded of him as to his movements on the preceding evening, he would have nothing very feasible to say; no statement, in fact, which would not drag in Bathia's name unpleasantly. But since the horse had been recovered, and his presence at the inn scarcely observed, there seemed as little need for voluntary explanations, as there was a likelihood that suspicion should demand them of him.

With an unrecognized irony of circumstance, he was turning his steps towards the house of the woman to whose mind he had already become a dangerous quantity in the economy of her life's history.

Arrived at the house, the recent tragedy of which was as yet unknown to him, he sent in a message to Bathia, asking for her somewhat awkwardly as Mrs. Woodland's guest.

"Mrs. Chaldecott, sir?"

A strange glow ran through him at the words. So she passed by his despised name, after all!

Within a minute Bathia appeared. Surprise at his audacity, and a natural desire to learn the facts of last night, drew her out. He stood waiting in the hall.

"I guessed it was you," said she, a little shrinking in her look. "Why have you come? Wait! We cannot talk here."

She ran upstairs and returned equipped for walking. Her instinct for self-preservation was once more alert. Within four walls and beneath the roof of a woman who had practically withdrawn her protection, Bathia was afraid of him. In the open air she had escaped from him once, and, should he assert his legal claim, might do so again.

At the gate she turned into a quiet street of substantial houses that led down to the waterside.

"Well?" she asked, glancing sidewise at him as he walked at her elbow. "Such an intrusion should have a good reason to justify it. Mrs. Woodland will be annoyed. And I do not care to have to blush for the manners of my —acquaintances."

The blushing was done by Demas.

"I wished to speak to you," he said.

"You could have written."

"I wished to see you."

"You should not have called. Haven't you heard what has happened?"

"I have heard of nothing that suggests any impropriety in my calling upon you."

"Mr. Woodland was found dead early this morning."

The fact had little point or interest for Demas until Bathia explained. She gave of necessity Diana's version, so that he did not at first connect the woman in the stable-yard with the newly-made widow. But his wits served him well enough to prevent his alluding to his encounter with Nicholas Woodland—since Bathia would naturally speak of that to her friend, unless warned to keep silence. And to ask a favour of that sort from her would be to confess to the full his hopeless bungling. He merely made a few commonplace remarks, and passed on to the matter uppermost in his mind.

"I failed you last night," he said. "That, of course, you know."

"My plans evidently miscarried," said Bathia with lowered eyes.

Demas went on, with no consciousness of her inner meaning:

"Is it any use to say that I am sorry? To offer myself again?"

"No use at all," returned she.

"You will not trust me any more?"

"I have trusted you too much already."

"That is true," he answered. "But are we always to go back to that old story without coming any nearer to a solution—to a better understanding of our position?"

"You tempt me into the allusion," retorted she. "As to last night's affair—you have made a fool of me yet again. You never intended to serve me."

"On my honour, I did!"

"Your honour!"

"On my soul, then—since you cannot deny me that."

" Blackened by too many false oaths already, to be worth swearing by," said she.

" You trip me up at every turn," Demas responded, surprised at the clearness of a wit developed by her untoward situation. " At least, I have not seriously inconvenienced you by my clumsiness, I hope."

" That, at present, I cannot tell."

" May I know your plans? "

" To what end? That you may continue to harass me in this way? "

Demas made no reply. Bathia, not freed from the belief that he was stretching out secret proprietary hands towards her, was using the only defensive weapons within her reach. Using them with a supreme unconsciousness that they were sharp enough to produce wounds. She masked her dread with disdain, but the dislike which lay at the roots of both was so strong that the effort was as easy as its effect was poignant to the man who suffered from it.

They had come to the end of the street by now, and unthinkingly Bathia was proceeding along the quayside when Demas touched her arm.

" Not that way," he said. " It has bitter memories for —both of us."

Bathia paused, but did not turn.

" Then perhaps you will leave me," she suggested. " I am going in this direction."

" Again I ask, is there nothing I can do for you? "

" Nothing. Save to leave me alone."

Her persistent discouragement angered him.

" I am your husband," he reminded her.

" Heaven grant me patience! " cried she. " Am I likely to forget that most miserable circumstance? "

" I hoped that you might give me another chance—— "

" To bungle my affairs? No, sir. One learns wisdom by other people's folly—and one's own," she added, regarding his downcast look.

In her heart she did not believe that he had obeyed her directions in any particular, and when, later on, Felix Peverell's version of the theft filtered through to her, she found no reason to modify her opinion. Considering the value of the animal in question, and young Peverell's expressed anxiety, there was nothing remarkable in the fact that a theft actually had been committed on the very night when she had planned one by another hand. Although Demas was aware of what was at present in her mind, his pride still prevented him from making the full statement that would necessitate the obligation of her silence. That she might wilfully betray him was as far from his thought as it had been from that of the inexperienced girl who, having set the ball a-rolling for his undoing, had intended to let the affair shape itself as it might.

For the present, therefore, Demas must perforce accept her crude dismissal, unsatisfied and unpardoned though he was. Already Bathia was walking on. He caught her up for a last word, which was, in effect, a final entreaty.

"Will you let me know where you go when you leave this place?" he asked.

"I will not," said she, reading a systematic pursuit of herself into his words.

Their eyes met. Both pairs were kindling under the fire of their several emotions. Her very fear lent her courage, so that in this warmer mood she seemed more remote, more adamantine, more inimical than in her previous cold aloofness.

"By God," cried Demas in the bittersweet of his hopeless love, "you may leave me if you will, but there is no corner in the world where you may go that I will not discover and follow you to!"

She leant forward a little; her breath cooled his hot cheek.

"You brute! You coward!" she said. "Oh, heavens, how I hate you!"

And turning, she once more fled from him, light feet pattering over the unpaved way, until she found herself once more in the better frequented streets, and free to proceed without dread of his step at her side.

But Demas had made no attempt to pursue her. His last outburst of passion had induced as great a physical collapse as the sickness of soul which her retort had inflicted. Exhausted and dispirited, he waited for a few minutes to recover himself, and then slowly returned to his own lodgings by another way. After which he fell into a mood of brooding melancholy, from which he was partially aroused, late that evening, by the arrival of Parson Willavize.

The travel-stained cleric threw himself into a chair, and asked whether Demas had heard the news.

"Though, to be sure, you must have done so," he added. "It seemed to have been fairly well sprinkled as I came along."

"About the horse?" questioned Demas languidly.

"The horse? Damn the horse—no! What's the matter with you?—what have you been doing to yourself? About my lord."

"I've heard nothing. Not——?"

The parson drained a beaker of brandy, and nodded gloomily.

"That's it," said he. "Dead. A sudden heart attack. Last night. Well—here's to the memory of a pious soul!"

"I'm sorry to hear it, though I'm not surprised," said Demas with genuine regret. "He was very good to me."

Willavize smacked his full lips over the spirit, and looked at his companion with such a thoughtful air that his next words were sufficiently startling in their vehemence.

"I don't know that you've got much to thank my lord for, after all!" said he.

"I understood," returned Demas, "that I had. You've been preaching gratitude at me for a great many years—I know that."

"Have I? Well—a matter of conscience, perhaps. It doesn't do to let a young fellow accept everything for granted. But the benefits are at an end now. You'll get nothing more, and, for your sake, I own I'm disappointed."

"Is that why you're in such a bad temper?" asked Demas coolly.

"Confound you, sir, I'm not! Apologize, or I'll break your head!"

"Oh, very well," said Demas, falling back into his listless manner. "But don't worry on my account. I didn't expect anything more from Lord Maumbury."

"Gad, you're right there, you scoundrel! You've brought this upon yourself. A mighty lot you've deserved from my lord of late, disobeying him at every turn! I tell you your wicked insubordination cut him to the heart, and embittered his last moments."

"For God's sake," cried Demas, "don't try to make me more wretched than I am!"

"Wretched, eh? What's wrong, my boy? You look cursedly ill."

"I've taken cold, I think; that's all."

The parson grumbled at him.

"You're always taking cold," he said.

Demas said no more on that point. The weakness was one of the legacies left by Squire Loveridge's inhuman rounding-off of the flogging episode.

"Tell me about Lord Maumbury's death," he said, after a short pause.

In a few brief words the parson complied.

"Then Gervis Peverell is the new earl," said Demas thoughtfully.

"Yes; Gervis, of course." The parson spoke sourly.

"I wish it had been the other one," remarked Demas. "I like him rather."

"He's the pick of the two," assented the parson.

"Has his uncle provided for him? But, I suppose, the will's not known yet?"

"The will?" blustered the elder man. "That's the devil of it for everyone. There is no will."

"No will? Is that a fact? I thought men with property always made wills."

"It doesn't affect the property, you fool. That's *in tail male*, of course. Gervis steps into all that."

"When I said property I meant——"

"I know, I know! Do leave off talking, and let me explain. The fact of the matter is that there ought to have been a will—and there isn't."

"I don't see why you should worry yourself," said Demas, as the other paused, a frown on his brows. "Unless he had led you to expect something."

"That's just what he did do!" snapped the parson.

"Ah! . . . I see."

"No, you don't! The truth is, with all his sanctimonious piety, Everard Peverell was a weak-kneed saint; if he hadn't been a lord, I should put it more bluntly, and say a coward."

"Surely not! He seemed to me to be quite resigned to the thought of his approaching death."

"You know nothing about it! His spirit was willing enough, I grant. But his flesh—oh, weak, very weak. The faults of his quality, no doubt. Sensitive to a degree, and therefore, as I say, timid-hearted. I never thought he'd play me this trick. If he'd had the courage to look things in the face like a practical man! But Everard Peverell was never that—so much the worse for everyone!"

"Don't miscall him," said Demas generously. "He was your friend, and I don't see what you want with any more of this world's goods. You can't manage all the livings you've got already."

"You dolt! I'm not hankering after more work, I assure you."

Demas said no more. He leant his chin on his hand and stared into the fire. In a few minutes the parson turned on him again.

"What are you doing, loitering about here, like a Jack-out-o'-work?" he asked rather roughly.

"Yes." Demas roused himself. "I wanted to speak to you about that. You offered some time ago to get me something to do."

"And you refused it!"

"Well, I want it now. Something with good wages. That's important. I'll go on with the teaching if nothing else can be got. But it must be a good position. After all, I left the last place of my own accord; they didn't send me away from that one."

"H'm," said the parson. "What's the meaning of this change of front?"

A little colour tinged Demas's pallor.

"I want money," he said.

"Been dissipating in your days of freedom, eh?"

Demas laughed, a little bitterly.

"You forget—I've a wife to keep," he explained.

"You don't mean to say——?"

"She'll not know where it comes from," Demas added quickly. "I've arranged all that. I shall send her two-thirds of what I earn, every quarter."

"I'll see what I can do for you," promised the man of many influences. "Have you seen her?" he asked.

Demas nodded, keeping an averted face.

"So has Gervis Peverell—my Lord Maumbury—it seems."

A subtle quality in his tones brought Demas's face round with blazing eyes.

"What do you mean?" he cried.

"He spoke to me of her."

"To insult her?" demanded Demas fiercely.

"That's how you take it," said Willavize drily. "It seems that he rather admires the lady—and openly scoffs at your claim upon her."

"My God!" cried Demas. And sat staring awhile. Then—"If I wronged her, the Peverells wronged her more! She must think of that!—she couldn't forgive them either!"

"One can never answer for what a woman may do," returned the parson. "She might fall into love with one or t'other of 'em. . . . Good God, Demas!"

With an effort the young fellow controlled himself. Yet the flame of jealousy had shot, as last night in the stable-yard, across that beating heart of his.

"Demas, my boy," said his companion, "you looked dangerous."

"She's my wife," said Demas.

"Just so. Nothing can alter that. Besides, you're going too fast. I thought I'd better tell you; that's all. Peverell doesn't seem very friendly towards you, however."

Demas remembered the intercepted blow, and a savage sort of pleasure lit up his brooding eyes.

"You've seen the lady," said Willavize. "When?"

"More than once."

"And——?"

"She's not encouraging. She told me, as a last word, that she hated me."

"The devil she did! Then I should let her go hang."

"I can't do that. For two reasons."

"Well?"

"Firstly—she's my wife. Secondly—I love her."

The parson rose, and banged his fist on the table.

"Demas Chaldecott," cried he, "the Lord condemn you for an utter fool!"

II

BATHIA WINS HER GAME

"Of course I congratulate you, my dear fellow—my lord, I mean," said Felix Peverell languidly. "You don't think I'm jealous, do you? I never expected to be the earl."

The new Lord Maumbury looked at his brother with less good-humour than might have been anticipated. He had accepted his recent honours and the enormous wealth which went with them in a dignified and unexcited way. And this none the less for his brother's disingenuous pointing-out that the succession had devolved upon him just in time to save the family fortunes.

"Since you had no such hope," he remarked, "you'd have been wiser to look after your affairs better."

"Oh!" said Felix a little blankly. "Should I?"

Since his uncle's death he had resumed his place in the fashionable world with an even greater recklessness than before that event. With the result that in the six weeks following the change in the Peverell affairs, his debts had increased to nearly half as much again as they had been at the period when he had looked to Bathia Loveridge for financial salvation. Something of which he had just delicately indicated to the new earl, who received the intelligence without sympathy.

The brothers had not met in private since the change in the fortunes of the elder. On the whole, each had rather avoided the other, and since Felix had ceased to visit Diana Woodland, and Maumbury did so now but seldom, they had experienced no chance encounter under her roof.

" You'd better look out for a rich wife, and settle down," advised the elder. " You've been going the pace lately, to judge by your appearance."

" I have," agreed Felix, who showed a pallid face. " Yes; I've been—enjoying myself, you know."

" You look it," returned Maumbury contemptuously. " But you needn't think I'm going to help you out of any hole you may have landed yourself in. Take and get married; there's my advice; the only thing I'm going to give you."

Felix pulled at his gloves savagely. He was paying a call at the Maumbury mansion in town. The signs of dissipation were heavy upon him—dissipation in which he had endeavoured to forget the pain of his last interview with Diana. But, since he was not naturally vicious, he had, even in this, the most desperate period of his life, set limits to his wildness, so that he was himself the only sufferer by his folly. And already the fit was wearing off; wine and cards and extravagant bets had lost their charms. He had eaten the husks of life and found them unsatisfying yet costly. Already the small inheritance which had fallen to him on his uncle's death had been seriously cut into.

" It's all very well for you ! " he broke out. " You've got a damned good rent-roll to fall back upon. I didn't get much out of my lord's intestacy. God knows what he did with his money ! "

" Meeting-houses and missionaries, wasn't it ? "

Felix swore softly.

" All I know is, he left a beggarly sum—for a respectable unmarried peer," said he.

" There's no use in grumbling," returned his brother. " Do as I tell you; get married."

Felix was roused to an unusual display of temper.

" I'm not going to marry," he burst out. " I'll see every woman in the world to the devil first ! "

Maumbury stared.

" I can't make you out this morning," he said, and returned to the trivial occupation in which Felix had surprised him.

" Don't wonder at that ! " returned the other bitterly. " Can't make myself out ! But I'm not going to marry for all that. What about yourself, eh ? " He put the question uneasily.

" Marriage ? Ah ! "

" The Peverells always do marry as soon as they come into the title, don't they ? " Felix pursued.

" You needn't go far back for a contradiction to that statement," observed his brother, laying a few delicate strokes upon a half-finished water-colour which was shaping beneath his hand.

" Of course not. But you will, I suppose. Diana "—he got the name out with difficulty—" Diana is free now."

His eyes, heavily ringed in his pale face, watched his brother anxiously. Maumbury's features were masklike in their immobility. He continued painting in silence for a few minutes.

" Has it ever occurred to you," he asked then, " that Diana will soon be old ? "

" No," said Felix, staring at him in wonder, and feeling his way towards an interpretation. " No. I can't say that it ever has."

" Ah ! But she will," said Maumbury with easy conviction. " She's changed of late—considerably. And she doesn't look nearly so handsome in black. I hate to see a woman unbecomingly dressed," he added impatiently.

Glancing up, he surprised a curious look on his brother's face.

" What are you doing there ? " Felix asked in confusion, and came to stand behind the other's shoulder out of the range of his eyes. " Gad, that's pretty ! What a clever knack you've got, Gervis ! And what a steady hand ! Look at mine ! "

But it was not altogether the effect of his recent high flights which he demonstrated by his shaking fingers now held out, though Maumbury believed that it was.

" You always were a fool," he remarked. " Lucky for both of us you're not the earl."

" I'm damned if I see what good I get out of your title," said Felix gloomily.

" Oh, my credit will keep yours going for a while yet," returned Maumbury. " Don't do anything too disgraceful. Remember the family name; that's all."

Felix snatched up his hat and cane in a subdued rage.

" Going ? " asked his brother.

" Going ?—yes. You're an unfeeling brute, Gervis, and always were. Yes. I'm going to get out of this cursed town altogether for a time."

" Oh ! Where are you off to in such a hurry ? "

" Where ? To Dorchester possibly. To the devil, more likely. Gad !—why can't I meet with a man ? "

" Better try your friend the schoolmaster," said Maumbury coldly. " I daresay you'll run across him down there.

Or even myself. I was thinking of travelling down in a day or so."

Felix stopped short at the door.

"You?" he questioned uneasily. "Is—is Diana there?"

"Not that I know of," replied the other. "Let me ring for you to be shown out."

But Felix hardly waited for the formalities, and after a raised eyebrow at his impetuous departure the owner of the house returned to his water-colour, and worked away at it until it was finished.

The next day he packed it carefully, and set out to carry it down to Bathia Chaldecott.

Under the subtle allurement of her charm, he had in these days ceased to think of her as the rebellious young woman whose refusal to ride at his request had very nearly brought his career to a temporary end. His sudden succession to a wealthy inheritance had given him a thin magnanimity, and he cherished no animosity against her.

Thus his mind had continued to receive the pleasant impressions which her first appearance before him in Diana's house had induced. Her influence increased and held. Her girlish beauty drew him irresistibly. Beside it, Diana of the Woodlands, in her widow's garb, showed her handsome face grown pale and haggard. Her eyes had lost their fine free look of invitation, and had grown almost furtive. When animation lent them life they became either wistful or feverish. She seemed, to Maumbury's growing irritation, to be perpetually waiting for something. And since that something could only be supposed by him to be the question which he found himself daily less desirous to put, her attitude of silent claim upon him drove his inclination yet farther from her.

Bathia had not repulsed him. Such encouragement as was implied by a winsome if reserved acceptation of his compliments and attentions, she gave. And not unthinkingly. In so doing she was following out the second and less mischievous of her plans. Her husband's favour she would not bend her pride to seek, even for his own undoing—the thing between them was too tremendous for the practice of such light arts as she was using for the subjugation of the man whom she had first known as Gervis Peverell.

To make of him a lover whose aspirations she could topple over at a moment's notice was the end which she had in view. And to gain it she had no experience, only the delicate intuitions of her sex. Using so little art, the man perceived none. In fine, it was her native simplicity and freshness which had the greatest attraction for one well versed in feminine artifice. So that, had her attitude been less ostensibly friendly, the young Earl of Maumbury would have pursued her with the same zest. The diverging point between what would have been and what actually was, lay in his easy confidence.

A few days after his interview with Felix, Maumbury sought out Bathia at Dorchester. To this town she had removed immediately upon the receipt of the alimony which she understood to be the silent token that her father had not utterly cast her off. Trifling though it was, it purchased her freedom from the obligation of Diana Woodland's roof, and instinctively she had drifted towards the county town. An assurance that the fund might be relied upon at regular intervals had removed all pressing anxiety from her mind.

In Dorchester, therefore, she kept her maiden state in a humble way, lodging at a small cottage which dipped its feet into the clear waters of the river amid a tangled garden. On fine bright days she spent much of her time walking abroad, either in the town or in the water meadows which lay bare and level beneath the softening skies. It was here, on an afternoon towards the end of February, that the pursuing Maumbury discovered her. He had taken up his own quarters in the house belonging to the family at the other end of the town.

His voice arrested Bathia from over her shoulder. Recognizing it, she turned at once. He held out his hand, and carried her fingers to his lips.

"You are from London, I suppose?" said she.

"Last night."

"Is it very gay up there?"

"Gay? Oh, yes. Balls and routs and play-going as usual." He let his eyes dwell on her fair form with greedy admiration. "Yes; very gay."

Bathia sighed.

"I wonder you had the heart to leave it," said she.

"I think," he replied, "that it was my heart which drew me away."

A wave of colour, comparable in his mind to a summer sunrise, swept across her face. She continued to study the clear waters of the Frome at her feet. All around them were the open level spaces of the grey-green meads; at a little distance what might be called the back of the town, chief among the buildings, set high above the flat depression wherein the river had its course, stood the county gaol. Overhead, a sky more grey than blue marked the period of the year when winter retreats as reluctantly as spring approaches.

Bathia turned a cooling cheek towards her companion.

"I thought I saw Mrs. Woodland driving through the town yesterday," she observed serenely.

Maumbury temporarily dropped his amorous mood for one of annoyance.

"Did you?" he asked in the half-incredulous tone of one who hears unwelcome news.

"I am sure they were her horses. Those beautiful bays, you know."

Maumbury knew the animals in question very well indeed. He wondered why he had wasted such gifts upon one who had only a surface appreciation of their splendid points. He stood prodding the ground with his tasselled cane, regarding Bathia's profile askance.

"Has not Mrs. Woodland called upon you?" he asked at length.

Bathia laughed.

"No. Why should she?" she returned. "We were not so very friendly at parting. Moreover, I live in a cottage now."

"I know." Maumbury's head came up with a jerk. "I wish," he said slowly, "that you would let me alter that."

Bathia put three or four paces between herself and him. She gave him no other reply. It was at this precise moment that she dropped her deliberate coquetry, and in so doing, committed the one act which would draw this man irresistibly to her side. For the intensity of Gervis Peverell's desires had ever been regulated by the inaccessibility of their objects. In this wise, Diana the widow was dispossessed of the seductive charm of Diana the wife; while the friendly Bathia added a hundredfold to her attraction the instant she showed herself in retreat.

Maumbury did not cover those three paces which marked her disapproval, but let his eyes dwell on her with open admiration.

"You're too fine a jewel to be buried in a cottage," he said. "Any honest man would cry shame on your lout of a husband for letting such things be."

"I would accept nothing from him," Bathia answered with scorn for the absent Demas, "even if he were to offer it."

Maumbury smiled inwardly. This was the first time that she had spoken expressly of her attitude towards the man who had married her. And it seemed encouraging.

"Yet no one else may supply his deficiency?" he insinuated.

"Have I asked help, my lord," she flashed, "from you or anyone?"

"Indeed, no. It would hurt me consumedly to see you beg for such things as are yours by right. That God-forsaken hole is no place for beauty like yours. Will you return to Mrs. Woodland?"

"I think not," said Bathia with determination.

"Or allow me to place you with other of my friends?"

"Thank you—no."

"Nor accept—'tis an awkward thing to say, and I hate putting it so—nor accept, as I suggested just now, a trifling loan until your plans are more settled?"

Bathia shook her head.

"You're devilish obstinate!" he observed. "And yet I like you all the better for it. Yes, I like your spirit, you sweet witch! Come, are we friends again?"

He held out his hand.

"Since when were we enemies?" she replied in evasion.

"You lost me a fortune," he reminded her. "God, what a fool I was!"

"But you are a rich man now, and so that thought need not distress you."

"I wasn't thinking of the money," he answered. "But of—other things."

Bathia laughed lightly, very certain that the moment for which she had schemed was in sight. Secure in her immunity from this man's claim, she had no fear of him. Said she:

"It is a little late, my lord, to speak of that, is it not?"

He swore beneath his breath. A ray of the late afternoon sun had caught a lock of her bright hair, and set it shimmering as it danced at her temple. There was no reproach in the wide gaze which she turned upon him, neither was there any mockery. She had simply screened herself from his inchoate passion behind the solid wall of a single fact.

"I suppose," he said slowly, "that a man who has had a jewel in his hand, and has tossed it aside to a pig, doesn't deserve much sympathy. My God, if only I had seen you that night as you are! Bathia! Beloved! Sweetest woman that ever a man lost through his own cursed folly! Bathia! Tell me this!"

"Too late, my lord," she answered. "Much too late!"

She stripped off her glove and held out the hand on which gleamed Demas's twice-used ring. Both pairs of eyes became fixed on it, and remained so for the space of half a minute. Then—

"Tell me one thing!" Maumbury urged vehemently, his handsome face set and anxious in his earnestness—"supposing it were not too late—supposing this marriage had never taken place—supposing—ah!" He pulled himself up short, and gasped. For a moment he drew back a step and forgot to watch her face. His breath came irregularly. He had all the sensations of a horseman who gazes down at a chasm into which he has nearly fallen. His cheek burned under the stress of his thoughts. Then he went on rapidly, but turned his speech into another direction, as the same rider might do if he wished to conceal his recklessness from the rest of the field.

"Supposing we could go back"—so he phrased his substitution for the original sentence, wherever it might have been—"with all our subsequent knowledge of one another fresh upon us, would you still refuse me your hand, and what I long for still more—your lips? Had this countrified oaf never come between us, would you have had no love for me then?"

"You wrong me, Lord Maumbury," said Bathia steadily. "I do not love my husband."

"That I am very sure of. It is good hearing. But I want more. You have not answered my question."

She had been watching the river as it raced and roared through a hatchway. Now she raised her eyes to his face. She was as sure of him as she was of herself. The moment was one which almost compensated for the humiliation of her failure where Demas Chaldecott was concerned.

"Lord Maumbury," she said, "if all that you suggest could possibly be, I should have nothing but contempt and coldness for the man who could so abuse a helpless girl's ignorance—as I have now. Do you understand?—as I have now."

Maumbury stared at her.

"By God," he cried, "you never led me to expect this! Do you care for me not at all?"

Bathia flicked her glove across the post of the hatch, and smiled.

"I care for you as much as—this!" said she.

With a twist of her hand she had flung the glove into the whirling water, and mockery bubbled from her lips as she watched his face. Then, with a gesture of dismissal, she walked past him and left him standing there.

He saw her reach the cottage and enter. As soon as her figure had disappeared, another came into view from the opposite direction. His plans and his passions holding him where he was, he had not moved when a hand fell upon his shoulder, and looking round he found himself gazing into the brilliantly angry eyes of Demas Chaldecott.

III

TWO THOUSAND POUNDS

"WHAT are you doing with my wife?"

The question struck so appositely into Maumbury's reflections that for a moment he had the sensation of having been overheard. But he recovered himself with his usual aplomb, and eyed the speaker coolly.

"That's not the way to address me, my man," he said.

"'Tis the way I choose. Come, answer me!"

"Do you know who I am?" asked Maumbury tersely.

"Perfectly well. And you know me. We've met before. Are you going to answer my question?"

"When and if it suits me," said Maumbury. "Yes; perhaps I will. On the whole I'm not sorry you've turned up, though your manners leave much to be desired. I wish to speak to you."

"The wish is mutual," returned Demas. "Please begin by answering——"

"Good God, man, you weary me!" exclaimed Maumbury with irritation. "I'll talk to you—yes. But not here. We may be watched."

"And if we are?"

"I prefer a more private place. That's enough for you."

Demas gave in. The point, to his mind, was a trivial one. It had its rise in the proximity of Bathia's cottage to the scene of the present interview. Maumbury, in view of what was in his thoughts, had no desire that she should by any means trace a connection between himself and the man before him. A chance glance from door or window might set the machinery of suspicion in motion.

"You know the Rings?" he asked of his companion.

Demas assented.

"Meet me there in half an hour from now," said Maumbury. "Follow me in ten minutes' time. You understand? No," he added, in answer to a look in Demas's eyes, "I'm not going near the cottage. I'll leave that road to you. I'm going this way."

And he turned abruptly and, without so much as a glance at the humble domicile of Bathia's occupation, strode along by the river's edge until the path brought him out upon the bridge at the end of the town.

A short time later, after a wistful loitering in the vicinity of his lady's retreat, Demas joined him at the Rings.

Maumbury had chosen his ground wisely. In this deserted corner of the town, sun-kissed and wind-swept on this breezy February day, no stranger was likely to break into the desired privacy. They met at the bottom of the eastern slope, two insignificant units, considered in the light of the traditions of the past. Above them rose the slanting green walls, shutting out the view of the distant town, and giving them only a stretch of blue-grey skies above their verge. And here, in this quiet verdant spot, where Time habitually brooded rather than passed, the honour and destiny of a woman were thrown upon the hazard, and a man's life and happiness enjeopardized thereby.

Demas came to a halt squarely in front of his companion, with the air of expecting to have his question answered without the formality of repeating it again. Maumbury recognized this, and regarded him thoughtfully. His animosity was on the alert, but as yet his temper showed a mere ruffling.

"You referred just now to our former meeting, Mr. —— I forget your name," he said.

"It is Chaldecott. Your memory is rather short. My wife bears my name, and you appear to be a friend of hers."

"Ah, of course. Very dull of me, I suppose. But the fact is, Mr. Chaldecott, I cannot, without an effort, bring my mind to regard a fellow like you as having the remotest connection with that lady."

"Then, my lord, I should recommend you to set about making such an effort at once."

"Oh, you would, would you? But the lady herself ought to be considered first. Are you certain that such a connection would be to her liking?"

Demas showed a heightened colour and replied angrily.

"The connection is already formed; indissolubly formed. You appear to forget that. And the lady knows very well my own regret in the matter."

Maumbury grew more alert, like a man who thinks that he detects a flaw in his own premises.

"Oh," said he, "then you do regret your—indiscretion, or your escapade, shall I call it, Mr. Chaldecott?"

"Call it neither, my lord. I do not spare myself. Since the first few hours I have not spared myself. Call it the most damnable act of my life, and you will not fall short of the truth. Then judge from that standpoint how sharp my regret must be."

Maumbury's expression changed yet again. Here then was no careless husband, chafing at the knots which his own hands had tied, but a man who stood self-convicted of the wrong which he had committed. Maumbury weighed his companion in this new character, and finally decided that it threatened no opposition to his plans.

" That being so," he said in a more familiar tone, " you would, I take it, welcome any chance of repairing the damage you have done to Bathia's happiness."

" Not that name from you, if you please ! "

" And I do not please to call her by yours ! Let us observe neutrality by alluding to her as Miss Loveridge."

" Very well. Go on. You have something in your mind, I see."

" The bucolic wits sharpen with distress, I perceive," interpolated Maumbury. " As I was saying, since you regret your past conduct so deeply, wouldn't it be wise to try to discover the means of nullifying it, if possible ? "

Demas started. Once again the hot blood swept across his cheek. His eyes remained at gaze, troubled even to despair. And behind the despair, for one brief instant, his companion caught a glimpse of horror. Then he recovered himself. But it was not until he had bared his head and turned his face to the wind that he gave a reply.

" I have thought of that," said he. " But I hoped it would not have to come to it." He paused, regarding the other with open antagonism. " Still," he broke out with warmth, " I think I am justified in regarding your interference as a liberty—an impertinence, my lord."

" No; there you are wrong," answered Maumbury with the ease born of renewed confidence. " The affair is as much mine as yours. More, in fact. I have Miss Loveridge's happiness at heart."

" And I no less," interrupted Demas.

" Granted, for the sake of argument. On the whole, I'm glad to hear you say so. But I can go farther than you, and declare that I have the lady's happiness in my keeping."

" That," said Demas steadily, " I do not for a moment believe."

" Your confidence runs away with your desire," returned Maumbury with a slight sneer.

"No. It comes of my knowledge of my wife's heart and mind. She is aware of your deception——"

"How have I deceived her?" Maumbury demanded coolly.

"By declaring yourself to be a married man in order to avoid wedding her."

"Who told you that?"

"Mr. Felix Peverell; some time ago. Miss Loveridge must have found it out by now; and I repeat, I cannot believe that she does not dislike and despise you for the humiliation your insincerity put upon her."

"Your inferences sound a trifle laboured, Mr. Chaldecott," returned the other. "I'm afraid that you understand the birching of urchins better than the analyzing of a woman's sentiments. It is a subject in which your own peculiar experience should help you."

Demas stood blazing with shame and anger. That the taunt should come from the man whose premature announcement had been the occasion of his dishonour made the insolent reference intolerable to a degree. His passion prevented speech, since words seemed a poor vehicle for the fury that was in him. Maumbury took advantage of this to wound where he had already inflamed.

"Perhaps you wonder how I come to know about it?" he said. "I'll satisfy your not unnatural curiosity. It was Miss Loveridge who told me."

Demas's inarticulate words died down into silence. He turned his face away, but not before his companion had seen the look of suffering which his delicately brutal speech had drawn across it. His own expression grew very thoughtful. It was impossible for him to try to doubt this man's love for the woman whom he himself had determined to win.

But now, with the declining of the sun, the wind was blowing chillily across the Rings. The sky had lost its pearly tint save at the western rim, and already the shade was deepening here in the bowl of the theatre. Maumbury drew his neckcloth more closely round his throat and considered that he had baited his victim sufficiently for his own pastime and the other's humiliation. He tapped him on the shoulder with his cane.

"Let's get to business!" he said.

Demas turned with an effort. He had a desultory remembrance of something which Parson Willavize had once said to him. He bent his spirit to acknowledge its wisdom: verily, the rod of his chastisement was in the hand of a woman and she was wielding it well.

"I have said enough, I hope," Maumbury went on, "to convince you, if you were so dull as to need convincing, that you are no fit mate for so fair and fine a creature as Miss Loveridge."

"Well?" said Demas, his face like a stone-mask and his voice expressionless.

"And you have already admitted that the marriage ought never to have taken place."

"Well?" said Demas again.

"It therefore remains for you to act up to your admissions, and to set Miss Loveridge free."

Demas stamped his foot passionately on the grass.

"I have already told you that it is not your place to suggest it!" he cried.

"I think it is. As soon as you have released Miss Loveridge from a union as hateful to her as it is unsuitable, I intend to make her my wife."

"You!" Demas's hands were clenched, and his mouth set hard.

"I said so. Keep cool. This is not a matter to be settled in hot blood. Believe me, the thing is not so impossible as it appears. Put it thus: this absurd marriage of yours once repudiated, Miss Loveridge is released from her present equivocal situation and becomes the Countess of Maumbury—a position she will assuredly adorn—I possess the most beautiful girl in the county for my wife—and you—master schoolmaster—you——"

"Yes?" said Demas, his eyes glaring at the speaker. "And—I?"

"You'll find yourself the better off by a couple of thousand pounds—quite enough for you to start housekeeping on with a wife in your own station."

"Good God!" cried Demas, to whom the vile proposal came as a surprise. "You mean—you suggest——"

"Nothing but what may be easily carried out," concluded his companion, and Demas listened with a kind of horrified fascination as the tenth Earl of Maumbury proceeded to unfold his scheme. "The girl is innocent and extremely ignorant of the world. All her actions have shown that. You've only to carry your penitence a little farther and declare, as shamefacedly as you please, that the marriage in a false name was no real marriage at all. That, in fact, she never has been your wife. The statement can't make her hate you more than she does already. She'll probably bless you for telling her. And, more important still, she'll believe you. The witnesses were ignorant rustics who don't count. My brother I'll manage. There only remains old Willavize. I'll square him, too. A hogshead of French brandy and the promise of the next bishopric will buy him easily enough. One or two of the lords spiritual are getting devilish shaky, and a word or so from me in the right quarter'll do the trick. He need only tear out that page in the register, and forget that he performed the ceremony. All very simple, isn't it?"

Demas, after his first ejaculation, had remained so motionless and silent, that Maumbury's confidence returned with renewed strength. He ended his exposition on an almost jaunty note. Demas, with an effort, answered him quietly, thus encouraging the illusion for a moment or two longer.

"Very simple, as you put it," he said. "You've only left one thing out of the reckoning, my lord."

"Indeed? What's that?"

"The improbability that I should consent."

Maumbury made a contemptuous gesture.

"Well," he scoffed, "I admit that I hardly gave it a thought. However, if you don't consider two thousand pounds enough, I'll try to meet you. Name your price."

"My price? You mean hers!"

"Pardon me—yours. The business part of the affair lies betwixt us alone."

"You scoundrel!" cried Demas. "You double-damned scoundrel! So you thought, did you, that my honour could be bought for two thousand pounds?"

"Your honour?" repeated the other; he laughed slightingly. "That's amusing. You will be bragging of your virtue next."

"I used the term which you were likely to understand best," retorted Demas caustically. And for the first time a little angry red showed in Maumbury's cheek.

"I permit no criticism of my actions from an out-at-elbows village schoolmaster like you," said he. "And I warn you, I shall treat any further insolence as it deserves. All this, however, is beside the question. How much do you want?"

"To make of myself the most despicable of creatures—a husband who trades upon his wife's innocent dishonour—and of her—what?"

"The Countess of Maumbury!"

"You can't marry her!"

"I mean to."

"She is my wife!"

"Pooh!—she hates you."

"Nevertheless, she is my wife," reiterated Demas with growing passion. "And while I live she can't marry another man. And as to marrying you—— "

"You can leave that part to me after you've done yours."

"My part?" cried the outraged Demas, no longer setting any curb to his indignant rage. "My part? Then, by God, you shall have my part done at once! There's no brother here to protect you now, my lord—just you and I alone!"

A quick step forward, an upraised hand, and the blow had fallen squarely upon Maumbury's cheek, while Demas's eyes blazed into his with not a couple of inches between them. Maumbury sprang back with a savage oath.

"You shall pay for this, you insolent hound!" he cried. "God in heaven, but you shall pay for this—you damned fool!"

"In any way you like!" retorted Demas. "But if I do, the story goes all over the county! Remember that, my lord—and think how she'll love you then!"

The truth lay so plainly on the surface of the words that for the moment Maumbury was silenced. He had no adequate retort, therefore he filled his mouth with curses instead. To which Demas paid no heed, for his own blood was singing loudly in his ears, and his own heart beating hard beneath its double burden of love and anger. He stood incapable of movement, quivering from head to foot, his spirit raging and yearning by turns. So highly-strung were all his emotions that at a finger-touch he would have broken down, but with his will unmoved and his purpose unchanged. So, for the space of three minutes, they strove as it were silently together; these two, in the dusky solitude of Maumbury Rings.

Then Demas turned and walked unsteadily away, leaving behind as enemy a man of far-reaching influence and of immense wealth—one who would hate him a little harder yet for the unequivocal manner in which he had shown him that he had made a mistake.

And as he went, the sauncing bell sounded mockingly in his ears.

IV

MAUMBURY'S DECOY

As he left the open ground which bore the Rings upon its bosom, and turned into the roadway, he passed an open carriage drawn by a pair of beautiful bays. Inside, a lady was seated. So much Demas Chaldecott's heedless eyes took count of, but no more. Yet to notice her at all he of necessity had turned his face towards her own. The last of the daylight fell upon it as he passed. And as she looked, Diana Woodland recognized him.

For a moment or so she sank back upon the cushions, somewhat pale and extremely agitated. When he had gone some little distance along the road, she called her servant to her.

"Who is that man who passed?" she asked with an assumption of careless interest.

"I don't know, ma'am."

"Then follow him and find out. I never saw so handsome a young fellow. Stay! Don't let him know that he is being followed. He might regard it as an impertinence."

The man departed. For a few moments longer Diana remained where she was, gazing at the imperturbably stolid figure of her coachman with her outward eyes, but seeing nothing save a dark stable-yard lit by a single lanthorn, wherein a chattering old man stumbled gropingly and clamoured for his wife. At length she raised her voice, and her motionless companion looked round.

"I am going into the Rings," she said. "Wait here."

Some half-hour previously, from a little distance away, she had watched the unmistakable figure of the Earl of Maumbury disappear in the direction of the same spot. While she hesitated over the question of openly pursuing him, another figure had also entered the Rings. Thereafter she had waited, halting her carriage near the point at which Maumbury was most likely to emerge, but in a position which also commanded the exit from the other side.

Since then, until the moment just passed, neither man had left the place. Her lover must be still within it; moreover, he must have been engaged in talk with the stranger. At least, the now agitated Diana could not believe that two young men had severally spent the better part of an hour within the same circumscribed space at the end of a February day.

And Lord Maumbury had not yet emerged.

If curiosity was aroused, alarm was doubly on the alert. Aware as she was, bitterly aware, that indiscretion had ruined her with Felix—her too eager disavowal and assertions having clinched any lingering doubt in his mind—she must needs penetrate immediately to the heart of this present circumstance. Summoning all her coolness and assurance, she advanced into the Rings.

Maumbury was still standing where Demas had left him, deep in angry thought, his heel dug viciously into the sward, the mark of the blow still red upon his cheek. He did not hear Diana's approach, and started when she addressed him.

His greeting lacked heartiness, and a little of his natural courtesy.

" I was driving past," explained Diana, " and saw you come this way. I waited, that I might tell you of my arrival in the town. But the charms of this dreary old spot have been very engrossing, it seems."

" Oh, very. Yes, 'tis interesting to everyone; Peverells especially. . . . I knew you were here."

" And have not called upon me ! " There was tender reproach in her tone. " Oh, Gervis ! "

" To be plain," he answered with a palpable touch of irritation, " I only learned it this afternoon."

" Indeed ? " she said, quivering. Her eyes dwelt on his face with painful intensity. She hung fearfully on his next words.

" From Mrs. Chaldecott," he said.

" Indeed ? " said Diana again. She spoke with an air of reserve which he was too absorbed to notice. And she added slowly, " I did not know she was here. Have you been in her confidence for long, Gervis ? "

" She told me where she intended to go, when she left Poole."

Diana bit her lip. Bathia had kept her plans secret from her hostess, dreading a betrayal to the pursuing Demas from that quarter.

" And you, Gervis ? "

" I'm at the old house at present."

" And I am at mine."

He nodded apprehension, but took no steps to complete her innuendo.

" And though, of course, I don't receive," she went on desperately, " I shall make an exception in the case of an old friend like you."

" You are very good," he answered. No more.

" Are you making a long stay ? " she inquired irritably.

" I hardly know. It depends on circumstances."

" Perhaps—on Mrs. Chaldecott," said she with an acerbity which at length penetrated his armour of indifference. He turned to look at her. In her widow's dress, and viewed in the now waning light, with her peevishness clouding her handsome face, she appeared less of a Circe than a Xantippe to a mind which had already deviated from its old allegiance. He had been right, he told himself. In a short time Diana would lose her good looks and become old. If Felix wanted her, he had better make haste, or the rose would not be worth the plucking, after all. The thought led him to his next remark.

"Have you seen Felix yet?" he asked. "He's here somewhere, I understand."

Diana gave a little shivering start. Her frown no longer expressed anger, but fear.

"Felix?" she repeated dully. "Is he here, too?" Then she laughed in rather a harsh key. "How remarkable! What centre of gravity has drawn us all to—Maumbury Rings, I wonder!"

"No common cause, I imagine," he rejoined. "In Felix's case, the debts and dissipation that lie in the opposite direction, I fancy. He seemed in need of consoling when I saw him last."

Diana grew whiter. Then anger, the despairing anger born of fear, swept through her. One lover she had lost; was she to forfeit the other, the most protective, as well? She raised her eyes to his, and found them fixed on her face with a ruminative expression.

"You are not very civil to-day, Gervis," said she with a little angry laugh. "This hoary old spot seems to have turned you dumb. Or are you already oppressed by the weight of the honours which derive their name from it?"

"Let me take you back to your carriage," suggested he.

"No. It is the hoary blood-stained old place itself which affects me to-day. They put a woman to death here once, for murdering her husband. Ten thousand people came to see her die."

"I know! I know the story!" said Diana hurriedly. "No doubt he—I mean she—deserved such a fate. How morbid of you to think of such things!"

"Well, I don't wonder at your distaste for local horrors. In fact, I was asking myself whether any woman would venture here after nightfall."

"Not I!" cried Diana with nervous shuddering. "Don't ask it of me, I beg!"

"I wasn't going to," Maumbury rejoined coolly. "It would be a test for the nerves and spirit of any lady. I wonder if your friend, Mrs. Chaldecott, would be equal to it. You called her once the most courageous woman you knew."

"Did I? I forget!"

" Would she do it, do you think ? " Maumbury persisted.

" You'd better ask her ! "

" I ? Well—hardly. She might resent the question as an impertinence, especially if her honesty impelled her to say ' No.' "

" Then her courage must remain unproven," said Diana tartly.

" Yet I have no doubt at all," said he with a confidence which irritated the woman who had imprudently avowed her own limitations in this particular test.

" I am sure you are wrong ! " she protested.

" Will you help to prove me so ? "

They had come to the entrance of the Rings, and both stopped instinctively where the steep cliff-like sides rose abruptly from the circumambient sward.

" Very well," she responded recklessly. " I will."

" Then write to her and ask her to meet you in the Rings to-morrow night at ten o'clock. Offer any inducement you please; I leave that to your ingenuity. Whether she refuses or acquiesces, send her reply to me. Your messenger can bring back her answer with him, so that my curiosity need not be kept waiting. If I am wrong—but I shall be right, as you will see."

" I cannot understand your interest in the matter," said Diana petulantly.

" Interest ? None but what arises from the fact that no man likes to feel disappointed in his estimate of a woman. Come, will you do as I ask ? "

" For the credit of my own convictions, I will," said she with firmness.

" I am much obliged," said Maumbury gravely, and Diana could have laughed at the irony of things. " If Mrs. Chaldecott does accept our challenge," he went on, " there will be no need to carry the thing any farther. You can easily excuse yourself from the appointment. My gallantry does not permit that two ladies should take a journey in the night air for nothing."

" Very well," agreed Diana. " And, if she does not accept the proposal," she added a little viciously, " I will let you know."

" I shall expect you to let me know in either case," remarked Maumbury with asperity. And Diana flushed.

" Very well," she said again, foreseeing the uselessness of deception, since he could readily satisfy any suspicion by an appeal to Bathia herself. And the man at her side appeared content.

He walked with her to her carriage, and placed her within it, but declined her offer to drive him to his own house. As a last word she said:

"If you wish to see the answer, Gervis, I shall be at home all to-morrow afternoon."

"I will call," he told her in a matter-of-fact tone. Bareheaded he watched her drive away, then turned from the prospect with a shrug. Yes; in a very short time Diana would be old.

She, meanwhile, drove home in a state of suppressed agitation. The fact that the woman Chaldecott—as she contemptuously named the fair Bathia to herself—was prohibited as a wife to Maumbury by reason of her former marriage made little difference to her own position. If, as she greatly feared, his wayward Peverell blood had taken fire at a new flame, there was little hope that she might win him back to her side, be his latest love as inaccessible as the moon itself. His very carelessness of concealment with regard to his attraction to her rival indicated a growing, even a settled indifference towards herself. Yet she must fight for that for which she had already struggled. She had bought her freedom at a fearful price. Was it to be won in vain because of a nameless girl sprung who knew from where?

Arrived at home, her first action was to direct that the man whom she had charged to follow the stranger should be sent to her immediately upon his return. When at length he appeared before her he brought information sufficiently agitating in itself.

"The gentleman is a Mr. Demas Chaldecott," he said; "only just arrived in the town. He is lodging in the Icenway, and is looking out for a situation of some sort. That is all I was able to find out about him, ma'am."

All? Enough to set Diana thinking.

"Did you speak to him at all," she asked.

"No, ma'am. You gave orders that he shouldn't see me."

"That is right. I thought he resembled an old friend of mine. But since he doesn't belong to the town, I must have been mistaken. Don't mention your errand, lest it should reach his ears, and cause him any annoyance. You understand?"

The man withdrew, and Diana sat thinking. Presently she set pen to paper, finding in her latest discovery a ready excuse for putting her rival's courage to the test. Her letter ran:

"My dear Mrs. Chaldecott,

"I have heard to-day news of your husband which you ought to know at once. Will you meet me at Maumbury Rings to-morrow night at ten o'clock? It is in your own interests that I make this somewhat curious proposition. But you must come alone.

"Believe me always,
"Your wellwisher,
"DIANA WOODLAND."

She had obtained knowledge of Bathia's whereabouts from Maumbury, and despatched the letter at once. Within an hour an answer was brought back. With a heightened colour she opened it. The bright spot glowed more richly still as she read. Her eyes glittered over the written page with mortification and annoyance. Bathia's answer read:

"My dear Mrs. Woodland,

"I will be at Maumbury Rings at ten o'clock to-morrow evening to hear what you have to say. I will come alone, and shall, of course, expect you to do the same. I only learnt of your arrival here recently.

"With compliments—
"Yours, "B. CHALDECOTT."

For a moment Diana's fingers quivered about the paper. Then, with a sigh, she relinquished the desire to destroy it. To do so would force Maumbury's hand, and, too late, she realized the folly of having used Demas Chaldecott's name in the affair. His wife, she argued, would certainly inform Maumbury of the fact, and he might well wonder how Diana herself came to have cognizance of a man about whom she had hitherto expressed entire ignorance and indifference. True, she might explain it as a mere bait, but the fact that Maumbury had talked with the young man on the same spot only that day, might offer conjectures other than coincidental. At any rate, her uneasy mind dared not risk it.

So it came about that when Maumbury paid his promised visit the next afternoon, Diana mortified her spirit by a scarcely gracious handing over of Bathia's brief missive. Tears sprang into her eyes as they jealously noted the infinitude of satisfaction which it apparently afforded its latest reader.

"Well?" he asked, refolding it neatly. "Will you own to a misjudgment, Diana?"

"To as many as you please!" she answered with some bitterness. "Indeed, I begin to feel a very poor judge of character in all directions."

"One might suppose," he observed, idly playing with the letter as he spoke, and holding her eyes to his face with his own, " —one might almost suppose that you grudge your friend a superior courage to your own."

" I? That implies envy surely? I am not so poor a creature, Gervis, as to envy such an unimportant person as Mrs. Chaldecott."

" Do you think her unimportant? "

" I have hardly considered the point."

" Yet you spoke with finality."

" On impulse, then. Yes; I suppose I must have been considering her so, unconsciously. After all, we know very little about her. A young woman picked up on the highway, whom I sheltered out of charity. The intimacy has dropped, and I, for one, do not wish to resume it."

" Then you will not go to the Rings to-night? "

" We agreed that it would not be necessary, I thought."

" Have you informed Mrs. Chaldecott of your—change of plans? "

" Of course. So, if you were planning a romantic chance meeting by moonlight, Gervis, there's no use in thinking any more of it. She won't be there."

Maumbury laughed suddenly, like a man who sees the last obstacle in the path of his intentions happily removed.

" Were you thinking of it? " Diana demanded, her black brows drawing together angrily.

" That's my affair," he returned lightly.

" I'm not sure," said Diana, " that it is not mine as well. Gervis—why have you changed so towards me? "

" I changed, my dear Diana? "

" My dear Diana! " she repeated scornfully. " That isn't how you used to address me! "

" Isn't it? Perhaps you are thinking of Felix."

She winced, in spite of her chagrin and anger, but recovered herself quickly.

" Felix was always more tender than you! "

Maumbury regarded her thoughtfully. It was at this point that, with apparent abstraction, he slipped Bathia's note into his pocket.

" Felix's not a bad sort of fellow," he said. " He's devoted to you, you know."

" Yes," said Diana with dry lips.

" Why don't you make him happy for life by marrying him? " Maumbury asked then. " I'd help him with his debts, and lend you Wyke for the honeymoon. You might do worse. He's a decent young fellow, and would sober down with marriage; and you're not so much older than he, after all."

Her face flamed.

"Gervis!"

It was sheer anger that impelled the cry.

"Besides, there's another thing," Maumbury relentlessly persisted; "just for the present, he really is the heir, you know."

"Gervis, Gervis, why do you treat me so?" Diana realized that she could hardly afford to be angry. "Have you forgotten that not long ago—oh, not so very long ago!—you asked me to marry you? You—you! And did I not promise that I would, as soon as I was free? I am free now, and with all the calmness in the world, you advise me to wed your brother! I like Felix, I respect him, but I never loved him as I do you. I—I——"

There she stopped abruptly, aware that she was hurling herself against the pitiless rock of a man's indifference. She clenched her hands, and watched his face. Maumbury, for his part, had his own reasons for an infinite satisfaction at the turn the interview had taken. In truth, he had helped to force it into this channel. He now leant forward, and took her hands in his.

"My dear Diana," he said in smooth and placating tones, "the time of which you speak is past for both of us. We were, I think, each a little premature and foolish. Inexcusable, of course, since we were neither in our first youth. But don't let us add a worse folly to that one, by refusing to own it as such. We shall always be very good friends, I hope, and if you do decide to marry Felix——"

She wrenched her hands away.

"I have your offer in writing," she reminded him. "In honour, you cannot reject me now."

"Please don't put it so harshly! After all, I once rejected another woman—the greater fool I!"

"What do you mean? Another woman? Who was that?"

Her face glowed with emotion. The facts were new to her, for Felix had made no full confession of his escape from a matrimonial embroglio. In a few words his brother now told her all that it was necessary for her to know.

"It was Miss Loveridge," he explained. "She wanted to marry me, but I evaded her, and passed her on to Felix. And in the end she got herself wedded to a shabby devil of a schoolmaster; named Chaldecott."

"She? That woman? She whom I sheltered and who has betrayed me like this?"

"The very same. You admitted just now that you really knew very little about her."

"I wish to heaven," cried Diana passionately, "that I had left her to starve by the wayside!"

"Come, come—that's ungenerous! She's sufficiently punished by being tied to the cur who's married her."

Diana's fingers relaxed. Her mouth drooped. The wan look crept back into her face, ageing it in a moment. Her thoughts ran riot. She could give verbal expression to only one of them.

"You—have met him, then?" she faltered.

"I have," said Maumbury. "As I said, a cur. And I don't like the look of his teeth. A fellow who has made many enemies, I believe."

Which was scarcely true, but the venom which was concentrated upon the unlucky Demas at this moment by the two speakers themselves would have been sufficient to accoutre half-a-dozen antagonists.

Diana pressed her hands to her pale face.

"You have used me very ill, and now you have wearied me as well," said she. "Please go. Yes; go where your fancy takes you. And leave me to forgive you if I can."

Maumbury took up his things, made her a slightly mocking bow, and departed, in no mood to discover any latent thought behind her last words.

His fancy took him straight home.

V

AGAIN—THE RINGS

ARRIVED at his house, Maumbury shut himself up in a room, and took out Bathia's letter. A second perusal increased, if possible, his former satisfaction. Had she been working with him she could not have penned a more adroit message.

He proceeded to cut off the upper line of writing, making the letter plunge into its subject matter without a formal preamble. Then he refolded it neatly, and secured it with wax, using no seal. As soon as it was dark, he left the house privately, and walked down to the Icenway—an ancient roadway now a street of smaller dwellings at the other end of the town. In a place so self-contained as Dorchester, the arrival of a stranger was an event freely discussed, and his temporary choice of abode a matter easily ascertained. It had taken Maumbury only an hour's trouble and some half-dozen civilities to trace Demas to this locality. But he had not approached it until now.

He found the house, walked up to it under cover of the darkness, and rapped on the door with his knuckles. When it was opened a few grudging inches, he thrust his letter through the aperture, and having ascertained that Demas was within, directed that it should be taken to him at once. Before the door was closed he had turned, and was making his way towards Bathia's lodging among the meadows. For more than an hour he lurked in this lonely spot, listening to the rushing of the waters through the weirs, and watching the cottage. At the end of that time footsteps sent him a little nearer to the building itself. A small dark object approached.

"What do'ee want, sonny?" inquired Maumbury.

"Mother did tell I to bring thĕase bit o' paper to the leădy as bides at th' cwottage," said the boy.

"Gi' it to me," replied Maumbury, holding out his hand. "I be jus' a-goen in."

The urchin relinquished the note, and trotted away. Maumbury followed as soon as he might, and once more back in his own house opened Demas's reply. It was brief, and merely expressed his readiness to meet the writer under the conditions named. Maumbury flung it into the fire when he had read it, and took himself off to a small gun-room at the back of the house. It was now close upon nine o'clock.

He had scarcely settled down to his next preparation when the door of the room opened, and his brother walked in.

"Hello, Gervis—how do? They told me you were in here. Lord, but you've smartened this musty old hole up! Why, 'tis a regular armoury to what it was in the old man's time. What a fine little piece that is you've got! Brand new, eh?"

He seated himself on the edge of a littered table and held out his hand for the pistol which Maumbury was examining at the moment of his entrance. The elder brother passed it over and received it back in silence. When he had fitted it into its case, he asked:

"What brought you here? Where are you staying now?"

"At the old place. Aren't you going to ask me to join you here?"

"I'm leaving for Wyke to-morrow."

"I think I'll come, too."

"Better stay on. Diana's here. In a rather chastened mood. You'd have a chance, I fancy, if you spoke now."

Felix turned his eyes upon his brother in surprise.

"And what about you?" he asked. "I thought . . . a chance for me? What the devil do you mean?"

"See Diana," replied Maumbury laconically, "and ask her. Did you come for any special reason?"

"Yes. . . . What did you mean about—Diana? You haven't quarrelled, have you?"

"Oh, no. She's a charming woman; just the sort to keep you straight."

Felix passed his hand across his forehead, and stifled a groan.

"I'm not going to get married," he muttered. "But I thought——"

"So did I! I thought you came here to see me about something."

"Nothing important. Only an echo of that Loveridge jade. I've got a thing that belongs to her. Upon my soul, I'd forgotten all about it, but I came across it t'other day. I want to return it."

Maumbury looked across the table with interest. Felix produced the little silver box which Bathia had once flung from her window at the feet of Jeremiah Puddy. The elder brother recognized it at a glance.

"How do you propose to return it?" he asked.

"Indirectly, I suppose. I don't know where she is, for one thing—and for another, I'm not anxious to meet her. You said something about Chaldecott being here. Have you come across him? I haven't."

"Nor have I."

Felix looked annoyed.

"That's a pity! I hoped you could have helped me!"

Maumbury made no reply, but began to arrange some powder-flasks in a box.

"As you can't, I'll stay and take supper with you, my dear fellow," said the amiable but inconvenient Felix, pulling off his outer coat as he spoke.

Maumbury's hand shook a little over the powder-flasks, and his face flushed a dull red.

"Stay a moment!" he said, like one to whom a recollection slowly comes. "I think I can help you, after all. I don't know the fellow's exact address, but it runs in my mind that—— Wait; I'll find out for you."

He left the room, returning a few moments later with an air of vicarious satisfaction.

"As I thought!" said he. "The fellow was inquiring about my movements of one of the servants, and was seen afterwards to go down the Icenway. That's all I can tell you, I'm afraid."

"Oh, well, 'tis enough," said Felix, getting off the table and slipping into his coat again. "I'll walk down and try to find him. Are you really off to-morrow?"

"That's my present arrangement. You can join me whenever you please."

"Thankye, my dear fellow. I probably shall. Good night."

"Good night," replied Maumbury, and glanced eagerly at the clock as the door closed.

A quarter of an hour later he slipped into his pocket the small pistol which his brother had admired, and also left the house. . . .

A late moon was breaking through the clouds as Felix walked down the quiet street, but the thin light chanced to be obscured as he turned past All Saints' Church into the Icenway. And though he noticed a man's figure striding along at the other side of the thoroughfare, he did not recognize him as the one of whom he was in search. It was not until his inquiries had led him to Demas's lodging, where he learnt of his departure five minutes earlier, that he associated the two facts in his mind.

Having nothing better to do, and being disinclined to await an uncertain return in the mean room that was Demas's present abode, he retraced his steps in half-idle pursuit. An inquiry here and there in the more frequented part of the town enabled him to pick up the scent without much difficulty. At first, he inclined to the notion that Demas Chaldecott was on his way to attempt an interview with Maumbury himself. But his latest information led him to another conclusion. Demas had turned into South Street, and must either be making his way down the South Walk on his return journey, or else prolonging his promenade by following the road to Maumbury Rings. . . .

At the moment when Felix Peverell stood halting between two opinions, Demas was looking at his watch by the light of the moon. The night being clear by now, and the watch-dial exceedingly large, he was enabled to ascertain that it wanted nearly half-an-hour to the time named in Bathia's letter. In a pre-occupied mood, therefore, he walked slowly on along the road, and entered the Rings from the further side. His footsteps fell noiselessly on the short grass, and the clouds, coquetting with the waning moon, filled the bottom of the amphitheatre with shifting shadows. Halfway along the curvature of the enclosing walls, he stopped, and threw himself down in a reclining attitude to watch for her coming.

To one of his receptive spirit the solitude and solemnity of the place must needs appeal. Purely pagan though its predominating associations were, seen at such an hour and season, any isolating distinction became a mere triviality—at best, an evanescent impertinence flung in the face of Time. Antiquity breathed upward from the sod, and lent to the spot the charm of the eternal. So that it became possessed of a soul, calm and immutable, to which the accidents of the epochs were but as moods past and forgotten. The thing itself, reflecting the great Omnipotence, and gathering up Its influence, continued to exist in a half-sublime indifference to the feeble history which man had sought to write across its face. Verily, thought Demas Chaldecott that night, here was rather Jehovah than Jupiter, the half-revealed truths of Christianity than the cloaked falsities which had stood for those truths in the amphitheatre and forum of ancient days.

He rested his body on the cold earth, and his intellect played awhile with such fancies, but all the time his heart was beating strongly with its new deep passion. Love, in any degree, had been hitherto a sentiment rather than an emotion in his life. His capacity for affection of the commoner sort had been stirred in one direction only—towards Parson Willavize. Lord Maumbury it had been impossible to regard with more than a somewhat cultivated gratitude and esteem. Friends, his own peculiar temper had prevented his possessing. Women, save in the parson's household, had not touched his young life. Julia Trickett's simpering prettiness had failed to open the door of amatory sentiment. The first bolt had been drawn when Bathia had laid her head against his shoulder in the coach, and made her unconscious appeal to his protective manhood.

And now? God, how he loved her! All the half-stirred forces within him seemed to turn to the one desire. Yearning, reverence, bliss, and pain itself—all were but synonyms for the deep ardent burning power that humbled and sustained him, that was at once his weakness and his strength. *A thing that creeps; it cannot goe.* Truly so. It had crept upon him unawares, as sweet as subtle, and as subtle as sweet. It would never leave him while he remained, in body, or in essence, a living soul.

He leaned back in the darkness and gave himself up to his love. . . .

Suddenly a sound cracked across the stillness. A pistol shot, at no long range. Demas was on his feet at once, running in the direction whence the shot had been fired and shouting as he ran.

Over the short turf a dozen men could have fled away unheard. The shot was not repeated, but in answer to his shouts there came a faint halloing from the mouth of the amphitheatre. As he came near, the moon broke free from the enveloping clouds and revealed a dark blur on the ground a little to the left of the Rings. Demas sprang forward, and found a man lying on the grass. Nothing else stirred in all that green space around.

"You're hurt?" asked Demas, kneeling by the figure, and gently drawing away the arm that screened the face. "Good God! Mr. Peverell!"

"I'm winged!" gasped Felix. "Shot from behind. Get me—get me——"

Then he fainted.

Demas, who had raised his head, now laid him down again on the grass, and considered what he had better do. Surprise at the affair set him wondering at the back of his mind, but the injured man's welfare held the first place in his thoughts. If the assault had robbery for its motive, it seemed probable that the ruffian who had made the attack might be lurking at no great distance, ready for a chance to return. Such chance Demas's departure for aid would afford. On the other hand, to leave the wounded man untended until some sort of assistance offered itself might have disastrous results. The place was lonely in the extreme, and well outside the town. To summon help without leaving the spot was a thing impossible.

In this state of perplexity Demas decided at length that the only reasonable act was to try to ascertain how far the injuries went. To this end he pulled out a tinder-box, which, together with a candle, he had brought with him that he might light his lady on her way, and incidentally obtain a sight of her face. Without much trouble, for the wind had now fallen, he got the candle alight, and proceeded to make his examination.

Felix was still pale and insensible. His breathing was laboured, and a little frothy blood was oozing from his mouth. Stripping off his clothing, Demas found a small bullet wound in the middle of the back. Whatever the object of the attack had been, the result was a very narrow escape for Felix Peverell.

Demas was genuinely distressed. A feeling of friendliness, even of intimacy, had warmed his attitude toward the younger of the brothers, who had attracted him from the first. He contrived a stand for his candle out of the tinder-box, and began to bind up the wound, which, however, showed but little blood externally. His own handkerchief being insufficient for this purpose, he presently began to search through his companion's pockets for another with which to enlarge the bandage.

In the breast pocket of the inner coat he came upon a small hard object. Beneath it evidently lay what he was seeking, and he removed it hastily. As he laid it down on the grass he saw that it was a little silver box of fine filigree workmanship. He then completed the bandaging, and rested back on his heels, still in doubt as to his next action.

While he so debated and hesitated, he raised the little silver box half-absently, his mind glancing off to the irrelevant question of its probable use. As he bent nearer to the candle-flame to make the scrutiny, his eyes fell at once upon the engraved motto and the entwined initials beneath.

And in that moment he knew that his hell had been a heaven in comparison with the torments which descended upon him now.

He propped his chin on his palms and stared into the moonlit spaces before him. The injured Felix, as far as his physical needs were concerned, was forgotten. But his personality, as a factor which had come between Demas and his chance of happiness, burnt into the young man's soul. Hollow-eyed and miserable, tortured by the twin flames of yearning and jealousy, he sat on, heedless of the night air, of his responsibility, of the advisibility of caution, even of Bathia's expected arrival.

Nor did he seek for a less final, less unbearable explanation of the thing which he had happened upon. The presence of Bathia's little silver box against Felix Peverell's heart could have but one interpretation. They loved one another; and both were aware of it. And he himself?—what, in God's name, was he? An outcast, a stumbling-block, a rock of offence!

That Peverell should love Bathia would have appeared to this unloved young husband of hers the most natural thing in the world. And that, in spite of the fact that this same lover had once declared his allegiance to another woman. A fancy here, a fancy there—then the true mating of the heart—so some men, he knew, ordered their affairs. As to Peverell's former slighting of her, he had himself been conquered after an antagonism which had far deeper roots than any which the other's indifference could have shown. But that Bathia, who had openly scorned and hated himself for the trick in which he had shared with Felix Peverell, should melt, relent, succumb to a woman's tenderness towards his companion in an unworthy duplicity, filled Demas with a dull wonder. The jeering words of Maumbury came back to him—ironically apposite as to place and circumstance—the sceptical words regarding Demas Chaldecott's capacity for plumbing the possibilities of a woman's heart.

At length the tension of his attitude relaxed. He put out his hand to raise himself, and it struck against the cause of all his misery. He lifted the box in a fierce grip. God!—she had handled it, used it day by day. The intensity of his grasp pressed back the spring; the lid flew open. A little faint perfume crept out into the chill air. Bending near the guttering candle, Demas saw a crumpled mass of flimy whiteness lying within the casket. It was as though his conviction received double-shackles as he looked. Only to a well-beloved does a woman give her handkerchief laid in a dainty shrine of her erst-while possession. Demas closed the box and dropped it on to the grass as though it had burnt him.

A movement at his feet almost startled him. For the time, Felix Peverell had become so much of an antagonistic, even a hated abstraction, that he had nearly lost all sense of his physical presence. Roused by the wounded man himself, he stood staring down at his dark figure dimly outlined on the ground a few inches away. The former question —"What shall I do?" was immediately followed by another—"Why should I do anything?" He remained inert, thinking and suffering.

This man was his rival. He had usurped the foremost place in Bathia's mind; had won her love, thereby shutting her husband out for ever. And more, by this reciprocal act, he had turned that husband, in her eyes, into a creature undesired in himself, and hated as the obstacle to a happy union with the man she loved. For one torment at least was spared this self-devoted sufferer, in that he did not for an instant swerve from his faith in Bathia's integrity. Cozened into a belief in the invalidity of her marriage, she might have been. Capable of infidelity to that marriage as an established fact, he would have staked his soul that she was not.

Then into his hot brain there came a memory, checking its wildness, clarifying and refining it. He remembered the night when he himself had lain stricken in pain and weakness until Felix Peverell's hand had ministered to his needs and sent him back to the care and comfort which his condition required.

His brain cooled. He bent over his companion. At that moment a sound broke crisply on his ear—the creaking approach of a cart upon the road. Running quickly forward, he was in time to hail the cart as it passed by. A few words of explanation followed, then, accompanied by the man, Demas returned to Felix Peverell.

He found him making tentative efforts to rise, and gently thrust him back, saying:

"Keep quiet. I'm Demas Chaldecott. You're hurt. Don't try to talk. We'll take you to your brother's."

A slight pressure of Felix's fingers in the darkness indicated his comprehension of what was said. But he made no other sign. Demas took up the casket, replaced it where he had found it, and extinguished the candle. He had already realized that Bathia would not come. The thought held further bitterness in the suggestion that his disappointment was a poor matter to set against her change of plan.

He took his part in conveying the wounded Felix away from the Rings. But as he went he found occasion to look around at the silent majesty of the place. Chequered by the moonlight, embossed with heavy shadows, the half-ovals of the uprising slopes had gained in impressiveness for him this night. Maumbury Rings. Already, so his heated fancy with conscious wilfulness advised him, had this place exercised a sinister influence on his life. Here he had first met the younger Peverell—a meeting which had led to the subsequent recognition at Parley, and so, indirectly, to the hatching of their unworthy plot. Here, too, he had flung the tenth Earl of Maumbury's vile proposal in his face, and ratified the incipient antagonism that had always existed between them. Here, to-night, he had learnt how bitter a thing is love despised—how burning a flame is jealousy. Had Maumbury Rings anything more for him, he wondered?

In the past and in the future other significances yet lay hid from his eyes.

VI

A CLEAR ROAD

It was not until late the next afternoon that Diana Woodland learned of the mishap to her former lover. The news was brought to her by Maumbury himself.

"A good thing, Diana," said he, "that neither you nor Mrs. Chaldecott went to the Rings last night."

She gave him an upward glance of inquiry.

"It seems that thieves, or other desperate characters were about," he explained without the contraction of a muscle, "Poor Felix—he was always an unlucky devil!—well, he dropped in for it again—rather badly, too."

Diana half-checked a startled cry; but whether of alarm for the man who aroused her affections for his own sake, or of dawning relief at the possible removal of a witness against her, she herself could not have said. Maumbury took it for the more obvious sign. And he was pleased thereat.

"He's been—hurt?" questioned the woman, paling slowly.

"Yes. Shot through the lungs. No; I don't think there's any positive danger. More of a graze than an actual wound, I believe. Oh, he'll recover right enough. I'd be ashamed of him as a Peverell if he let himself be picked off by some rascally night-hawk. If it was that sort of a fellow," he added thoughtfully.

Diana sat breathing hard.

"Hasn't he—can't he tell you anything?" she asked.

"He was conscious before I left. But he has no information to give. All he knows is that he was shot down from behind just outside the Rings."

"How terrible!" murmured Diana. "What happened then?"

"That I can't tell you, my dear. I wasn't there."

"Of course not! But when did you hear of it? And who found him?"

"Young Chaldecott brought him to my house late last night. The man I told you about—your charming friend's disreputable spouse. Said he heard the shot and found Felix on the ground, and had to wait until he could get help. Says he saw no one."

"What a mysterious affair!"

"What puzzles me most," went on Maumbury, standing squarely and easily before her, "is—what was Felix doing in that ungodly spot at such an hour? He'd just left me to go to this very Chaldecott himself."

"Ah!" said Diana faintly. "But why?"

"Oh, he had a rigmarole of a story—I forget what," answered Maumbury, loth to crush what he mistook for Diana's returning interest in Felix by an allusion which would couple him with Bathia. "Robbery, of course, is what one thinks of instinctively. But I'm not so sure. It may have been an act of recrimination."

"By whom? Felix surely has no enemies?"

"I am thinking of the fellows he baulked of their designs on the Gift Horse," explained Maumbury. "But I may be doing even their unscrupulousness an injustice. I wonder!"

Diana looked up quickly.

"Gervis! you've something in your mind."

"In private, then! Well, I was wondering if there might not be a connection between the hand that fired the shot and the man who helped him home."

"I see," said Diana. And fell at once into thought. "Why don't you have him arrested?" she asked suddenly.

"I can't very well at present. Oh, I've got my eye on him, of course, and if he attempts flight, I'll have him laid by the heels at once."

"Why," asked Diana with a perplexed look, "should this Chaldecott try to kill Felix?"

The question was not the outcome of an affectionate interest, but a testing of the strength of a possible chain to bind Demas Chaldecott, and so free herself. But it happened to be one of the stumbling-stones in Maumbury's own forging of such a fictitious chain, and he answered with impatience.

"My dear Diana, I don't pretend to state a case, or to explain everything. The thought occurred to me; that is all."

"Of course," pursued Diana, still following her own reflections, "it all hinges on two simple points: whether the shot was fired before or after a meeting between the two."

Maumbury kept the silence of assumed ignorance.

"And, in the latter case, whether Felix or Chaldecott left the Rings first and in which direction."

"Reasoned like a lawyer!" said Maumbury, whose own particular hindrance to an open accusation was his ignorance as to whether Demas had been already within the amphitheatre when the bullet had hit the wrong man, or merely approaching it. In which case, he might have evidence to prove his presence a hundred yards away from the spot. The stopping of Felix's watch in his fall had fixed the moment of the apparent attempt upon his life. Demas's own account had been naturally curt and devoid of details. So much uncertainty made Maumbury irritable under Diana's questioning. But she seemed hardly aware of his ill-humour. Certainly she was not deterred by it.

"Were Felix and this young man friends?" she demanded suddenly.

"Friends? My dear Diana! Remember his position."

"I know nothing of his position, Gervis; but I'll put the question another way. Was there any previous intimacy between the two?"

Unaware of what was in her mind, and keenly conscious of his own pitfalls, Maumbury judged it wisest to assume ignorance on this point.

"I don't know," he said.

Diana sighed. To her mind, ever twining round the question as to what connection could exist between these two, there seemed but one conclusion. The meeting-point of Demas Chaldecott and Felix Peverell had been herself. The man with the lanthorn had identified her even as she had identified him, and had taken his story to the man with whom she had had an assignation on the fatal night, probably with the idea of obtaining hush-money. To associate her with Felix Peverell must have been easy, she reasoned, since the horse-thief had in some way become possessed of her lover's letter changing the hour of their meeting. She wondered why he had not spoken before, until she remembered Felix's recent absence in London. And as the pieces fell, or appeared to fall, naturally into position, her face grew peaked and wan, and she felt that she must strike, desperately and at once, a deliberate blow for her own safety.

Maumbury himself, she took it, was ignorant of it all. His own interview with Demas in the amphitheatre no longer tormented her—a mere inquiry by Chaldecott for Felix's whereabouts—ending in insolence and a quarrel. So she read the matter now, for her own intuitive femininity assured her that it was a woman's beauty, and not a man's tale-bearing, which had snatched from her the coronet that she had so long desired. And the fact that, in striking her desperate blow, she must needs set the seal of finality to all her ambitious longings, was a grim piece of irony which gave an additional animus to her present resolve. Could she have been assured that last night's shot had been fired by Demas, she would have been content to let his downfall come about naturally. But though there was a probability, there was more uncertainty. Therefore she spoke.

"Gervis," she said, "tell me—you have little love, I gather, for this young man Chaldecott—would it be a satisfaction to you to know that he had tried to kill Felix?"

She threw the question at him so suddenly, and it accorded so well with his own aggravated hatred of Bathia's husband, that he was caught off his guard. She read his answer in his eyes before his tongue gave it to her.

"By God, yes!" he rapped out. "The man has stood in my way too often for me not to wish him ill! I'd see him hanged with the greatest pleasure in life."

Her face resumed its normal colouring. She motioned him to a seat at her side.

"Sit down," said she with a curious calmness of demeanour. "I think that I can help you to that supreme desire."

"You, Diana? You?"

He came nearer, and stood staring down at her in open amazement.

"You suggested just now," she went on, "that the outrage upon Felix might be due to attempted reprisals by the thieves of the Gift Horse, or to this Chaldecott. Did it never occur to you that both explanations implicate the same man?"

Maumbury started, and, still saying nothing, gave her an even closer attention. Diana, though she had come to the crucial part of her narration, continued steadily:

"I don't accuse Chaldecott of trying to murder Felix, of course. Of that I know nothing. But I certaintly do accuse him of stealing the Gift Horse."

"Why?" asked Maumbury incisively. His lips had grown to a thin line; every feature seemed to have sharpened.

"Because I saw him in the very act."

He raised an eyebrow.

"And have not spoken of it before?"

"No. For a very good, though purely feminine, reason."

"What is it?" he asked.

"I was at *The Antelope* that evening," Diana told him, any distress in her manner merely lending colour to her previous statement. "I went there to meet Felix. I would not tell you—or, indeed, speak of it to anyone lest you should hear. I dreaded angering you; you were very jealous of Felix in those days. I was afraid of losing your—regard. But yesterday you showed me very plainly that I could not cheat myself into believing that you would be jealous any longer of any man for my sake. You understand, don't you?"

He nodded, less interested in her explanations than in the narrative itself.

"And there, in the stable-yard, I saw a man, a young man, very handsome, with extraordinarily brilliant dark eyes."

"That's Chaldecott!"

"He was unlocking the stable door in a furtive way. No one else was about. I don't think he noticed me; 'twas very dark in the yard. He had a lanthorn and held it up to the door. That was how I saw his face. Then he went inside. It never occurred to me that he had no business there. I waited for a few minutes, then as Felix did not come I went back home. The next thing I heard was that the Gift Horse had been stolen, and recovered by Felix from three unknown men a few miles out of the town."

"Chaldecott was found bleeding and unconscious in the road," said Maumbury.

"Was he? That proves nothing. He was probably the dupe of professional thieves who knocked him on the head as soon as he'd done his part."

"Feasible," said Maumbury.

"I think so," murmured Diana with dry lips. And, in truth, she had no reason to believe in Demas Chaldecott's moral innocence of the crime.

Maumbury's eyes had already begun to glitter.

"And are you ready to repeat all this to others?" he asked her.

She bowed her head.

"To swear it, in a court of justice?"

"If you carry it so far."

"You render me your debtor, Diana," said he. And at that the misery of her anomalous position broke fully upon her. She was to render this man the service which would free Bathia Chaldecott for him, and because of that woman's freedom to ask a reward for her service was useless.

Maumbury was not thinking of her at all. He did not even at this time ask himself the meaning of her generosity. Later, he set it down to a renewed tenderness towards his brother, and an unevidenced belief that Demas was the assailant of the night before.

"By God," said he, half to himself, "I think I have him under my thumb at last!"

"Indeed, I hope so!" murmured the woman at his side. "If he's found guilty, they'll hang him, of course."

"If the Earl of Maumbury has any influence in certain quarters, they will," answered the other with grim relish. "The fellow's outwitted me more than once—damn him! But I don't think he'll escape this time."

He turned sharply, crossed the room, and came back to Diana's chair.

"You stated at your husband's inquest that you were at home all that evening. How are you going to reconcile that with your present story, should the point arise?"

"Why should it arise?" she asked faintly. "The two affairs have nothing to do with each other."

It was a risk which she foresaw in a more deadly light than did he. But her own sense of guilt had built up a passionate belief that if she did not strike, this Chaldecott would. And at least her case after she had spoken would be no worse than if she tamely waited for him to accuse her of the more serious crime. Moreover, she had no reason for regarding Demas as other than a penniless young man without friends or influence to help him in his need. Again, once in the dock, his mouth would be officially closed, and the only other witness against her was one who, she knew, would go to the gallows himself rather than betray her. Yes; she drew comfort from the thought—Chaldecott at large and Chaldecott a discredited felon were very different powers to reckon with.

Tormented and perplexed as she was, she had now arrived at the desperate crisis when caution can no longer be made either a standpoint or a safeguard. But what wit she had to spare from a consideration of her instincts and reasonings was dimly perceptive of the fact that if young Chaldecott was guilty of attempted blackmail, and was arrested for the attack upon Felix's life, the reason of such an attack would be bound to come out, and her name and actions dragged forth into the lurid light of a criminal court.

Meanwhile, to Maumbury himself the charge mattered little—whether horse-stealing, attempted murder—so that he had his enemy beneath his heel. After a few moments' thought over Diana's last words, he inclined to her point of view.

"You have made me your debtor for ever," said he with a heedless cruelty under which she drooped anew. "The gratitude of a Peverell, like their enmity, is a thing to reckon with. Can I carry any message from you to Felix?"

She shook her head; her whole frame was quivering with unspoken misery. And not the least part of it was caused by the sense that this man was accepting what he could only regard as the acme of generosity from her, with less warmth of appreciation than her servants showed in taking their wages. She wondered dully whether, after all, he knew. Whether Chaldecott had told. But wanting any clear evidence, either in his words or action, her weary mind let the thought go; even as he himself had by this time gone—out of her house, and still more definitely, out of her life, as far as the tender intimacies which had promised so much and effected so little, were concerned.

VII

THE CALL

Demas sat alone in his room in the Icenway.

The day was closing in, and the temperature, pleasantly high during the short period of sunshine, had dropped to a perceptible chilliness. But he had ordered neither firing nor candles. His own fevered blood made him insensible to the cold and damps of the natural world, and his burning eyes needed no artificial light to show him the picture that rose up before him from every corner of the shadowed room. For him it was peopled by two figures that moved and fell into various tender attitudes, that looked at each other with ardent glances, and turned upon himself a bitter and reproachful gaze.

There was no longer any doubt as to into which of the two havens the sauncing bell had tolled himself.

But the pain was subject to variations in degree and kind.

At its worst and deadliest, it swept across his soul with a fury that well-nigh devastated every generous impulse, every unselfish thought. He recognized the danger, for the weeks of discipline had enlarged his spiritual experience, yet he could scarce find strength to combat the evil which his wild jealousy brought behind it.

There was no tender recollection to fall upon his scorching misery; no remembrance of one kindly glance given since she had known the truth. The echo of her scornful tones fell across his spirit with as biting a lash as that laid upon his lacerated flesh by her father's whip. The memory of it went deeper still, and produced a reflex of pain. For here at least there was a justification in his suffering—and while he writhed under it, he admitted it to be his due.

All day the torment had continued. He had seen no one, and had not left the house. Neither had he taken food nor rest since his return on the previous evening. His thoughts had sustained him while they insidiously undermined his strength. At the present moment he was more weary, more physically broken, more exhausted than he himself was aware. Comfort for his body and sympathy for his mind were the things he needed. And there was none at hand to give him either.

The room, a poor barely furnished place, had few resources within itself. The small hard bed suggested only a night of feverish wakefulness. A growing poverty spoke with cynical candour from the walls. A cracked mirror reflected his bent and towzled head, or mocked his haggard face with hideous distortions. The chair into which he had thrown himself creaked under his weight. The immoveable window was as dim with dust as with nightfall. And the room was growing very cold.

He rose at length and leant his aching forehead against the pane, staring out through the uncurtained glass into the twilit street. Then, after a few moments of such dull staring, without interest or purpose, he suddenly shivered, and came back to a consciousness of outer things.

It was then that he first realized his bodily aches and pains, and their probable cause. With a curious re-action, every detail of last night's events came back vividly to his mind.

He recalled his quiescent mood while waiting for Bathia, and its physical expression. The chills and damps of Maumbury Rings must have struck into his bones and muscles, concentrating themselves, as he should have foreseen, on a chest rendered delicate by Squire Loveridge's immersion. And to clinch the matter, in his subsequent attendance upon the helpless Felix—a ministry performed with a zest which had some of the elements of self-abnegation—he had stripped himself of his outer coat to form a covering for the injured man. The garment had not been restored to him in the confusion following the arrival at Maumbury's house, and, pride forbidding a formal request, he had returned to his lodging without it. As a result of all this, nature was already drafting out the account for his folly, and soon it would be sent in.

A spirited tapping at the door aroused him from his melancholy mood.

As he crossed the room a voice piped through the panels.

"Plaze, sir, med I coome in to see 'em teäke 'ee?"

Demas recognized the voice as that of the urchin belonging to the house. He unlocked the door, and looked out. The narrow landing was in darkness, but an excited head ducked under his arm, and a small figure quaked with joyous apprehension at his side.

"Th' constables! They be a-coomen soon."

"Constables?" repeated Demas, frowning.

"'Es, sir. 'Twas Johnny Leggatt as twold I—him as feyther's Constable Leggatt. He'd jus' a-gone for to fetch his trunch'on, an' Johnny runny to tell I."

"But why do you come to me?"

"Acos, sir, 'tes you they be after!" shrieked the urchin, squeezing his hands between his knees with delight.

"What?" cried Demas, and caught the boy by the shoulder.

"'Es, sir—'tes true. A' reckon they'll be here-along in a minnit. An'—an'—plaze, sir—ye be a-hurten crewl!"

"Stand up then, and answer me! Who started this story?"

"Johnny Leggatt—I did tell 'ee."

"What else do you know?"

"A' said—a' said a girt fine gen'leman were a-talken to his feyther, an' give en a paper. A girt lard he were. Lard—Mumb'ry, a' said. Whoo!—whoo!"

Demas's knuckles dug more deeply into the whimpering boy's shoulder.

"Go on!"

"They said you'd be hung," mumbled the boy. "An' so I coome to see 'ee a-taken—as I never saw a man a-took off to be hung afore."

"What do they say I've done?" asked Demas, standing rigid with his hand still detaining his companion.

"Took a harse!" whimpered the boy; "whoo—whoo! You'll be hung—in chains, Johnny Leggatt do say. An' I—I'll be there to see 'ee, I will. For a girt sight it be to see a man hung in chains, an' I ha'n't never seen it afore!"

Demas led the boy go with a violence that equalled his previous tenacity. It pleased his dumb rage to hear the urchin's bullet head strike the wall.

"Be off with you, you young vampire!" he ordered fiercely. "Quick, or I shall do you a mischief!"

His eyes blazed in what little light was left in the room, and the boy scuttled off and clattered down the stairs, throwing back boyish taunts as he went. But Demas had ceased to heed this juvenile tormentor long before the last epithet had been flung.

Apathy had now completely fallen from him. His mind, restored to its normal activity by the shock, was working quickly. And once assured of the genuineness of the alarm, his whole thought was of Bathia.

A very short reflection had convinced him of two things: first, that the boy's report was probably correct, and next, that it was sufficiently near the impending event to admit of no delay. An agony of apprehension—too unselfish, though it was born of love, to allow one grain of jealousy either to strength or to weaken it—quickened his stiff limbs.

He ran to the window, where so short a time before he had leaned in a dejection so utter that he could have believed no possible event of sufficient interest to awaken any emotion whatsoever. Peering out now, with all the blood singing in his ears, he saw that the quiet roadway below him was still quiet, the empty footpath still untrodden by strangers' feet. He stood back, panting, and cursed the breath that came so brokenly at a time when he needed all his strength.

The great fact which had sprung out from the boy's lips and had struck him at the heart was the knowledge that, if he suffered this threatened arrest, Bathia, she, his love, his wife, would be left alone for Maumbury to deal with at his own vile discretion. God only knew what evil that clever and cynical casuist might plot against her forlorn helplessness, to bring her sweetness to his grasping arms!

Demas groaned as the thought pierced red-hot through his brain. She, his love, his wife, to be left to endure the tender mercies of the wicked, and himself unable to raise even a forbidden finger in her defence. Proud she was, very sure of herself, quick to discern evil—but what should pride and self-confidence and intuition avail her against the man of the world, whose scruples capitulated to desire, whose conscience was annihilated by a woman's beauty?

Bathia must leave Dorchester that night.

The resolve had sprung into his mind perfected and ready-armed. He made a feverish search among his belongings for the few notes and coins which represented the whole of his immediate resources. When at length he had collected them to the last penny, and found them to amount to even less than he had supposed, he cursed the pride which had prevented his retrieving his greatcoat from Maumbury's household. For on the previous evening, encouraged by the cool toleration of Bathia's letter, he had lined the pocket with nearly the whole of his remaining capital in anticipation of his love's straitened circumstances. No use in repining. The sum in hand must suffice. Mere folly to waste one's breath in cursing, when so much might be needed to induce her to accompany him. He thrust the money into a pocket, snatched up hat and neckcloth, and opened the door. Then, finding the house still quiet, he slipped down the stairs. An interval of not more than three minutes separated his going from that of the boy.

In another moment he had left the house, and racing in his tracks, was making by circuitous backways for the cottage which sheltered his love.

He was not planning an escape as such is usually understood. One goal only had he set before himself—the safety of Bathia; and the means to this end lay through Parson

Willavize in his quiet home at Southampton. With her housed beneath that shelter, Demas would have a detached mind to bring to bear upon his own position. For the present, he regarded his danger merely as the necessity for Bathia's flight. All question of ultimate escape, or of plausible defence, or of how much incriminating evidence could be collected against him, he postponed until the greater issue was safely carried through. He did not, at this period, entangle his wits, or diverge his thoughts by a natural wondering as to how Maumbury had probed his one vulnerable spot.

It was close upon six o'clock, and quite dark, with the gusty darkness of an early spring evening, when Demas reached the lonely cottage which he had approached by a miz-maze of half-circles and diagonal retracing of steps. The river, whipped to a creamy froth around the weirs, caught here and there a dull steely glimmer from the light in an open doorway on the townward side. But Bathia's lodging added no candle-ray of luminosity, and beneath the bridge the water ran dark and chill. The acrid scent of last year's dead leaves, chased into decaying heaps by the wind of the new spring, rose up from the paths on the night air. But the sky was lifting, and presently there would be the moon.

And so he drew near to his wife's side again. But in different mood from any which had held him on former occasions. All personal sense of humility, wrong-doing, even of jealousy itself, was as dead within him as the spirit of fear on his own account. He no longer approached her as a despised suitor, an unwanted husband, or a humble servant. It was as a master that he came, not to warn, not to advise, not to implore, but to dictate; if need be, to command. *Will she come?* was a question which died away before the impelling force newly risen within him, which stated a fact so obvious that ways and means were henceforth things of no account for him—*she must.*

With such a spirit, with such unconscious power—since self-confidence must ever draw strength from itself—he ran up to the cottage, and clamoured noisily for admittance. It was Bathia herself who opened to him.

At the first she did not recognize him. He put out a hand to draw her into the night, then, seeing the room empty beyond her, asked an eager question :

"Are you alone?"

The hoarse voice and the unmistakeable anxiety in it sent her back a pace. He saw her proud young figure rear itself defensively against the door-jamb, as she stood staring out at him, backed by the dim light in the room behind her.

"Why do you ask?" she said very quietly, and with no trace of alarm.

"You are!" exclaimed Demas, and stepped over the threshold.

She cried out at his entrance, but in the pale candlelight he turned and faced her. For a moment they looked at one another. Then he closed the door. The blood flew up into her cheek, but died away again as his handsome haggard face flashed round upon her once more. He saw her eyes grow hard and contemptuous, and for once he took no heed.

"I have come to take you away," he said, speaking as fast as his labouring breath would allow.

"You? Are you mad?"

"No; very sane. Very alive to the risk you run by remaining. You must come with me at once."

"Do you think——?" she began.

"Of your danger! Of nothing else. Every moment adds to it. Please do not stop to argue. We are losing time. In another five minutes—or less—it may be too late."

"But——"

"If you have anything to fetch, get it at once. And wrap yourself up well. The night will be cold."

"What mad folly—what wicked plot—is this?" she cried, a bright spot in either cheek, and her foot already tapping the floor. "You ask me to go with—you?"

"There is no help for it. Is this your cloak?" He took it up from a chair and came towards her. She shrank away. He held it out. "Put it on. At once," he said.

"No!"

"You must."

She snatched it from his grasp, and held it so, trailing upon the floor, her eyes on his face.

"What has come to you?" she asked. And now there was less of anger than of a cold kind of wonder in her gaze.

"Please finish dressing. I will explain things to you as we go along."

"And in sober earnest you expect me to accompany you—of all men!—at night-time, too, without one word of explanation from you? Absurd! Intolerable!"

"I do expect it," Demas told her, regarding her with a gaze no less steady than her own. "I was never more sober nor more in earnest. For God's sake, make haste!"

"It is another trick!"

" Heaven help you—no ! "

" Heaven protect me against all such knaves ! " she cried, and flung the cloak down.

Demas again took possession of it, but now he threw it across his own arm. He came a step nearer, and clasped her wrist. His white set face and glowing eyes were very near her own.

" At any moment," he said, " I may be arrested by the constables. The warrant is out, and they are already on my trace. If I fall into their hands, you will be left at the mercy of Lord Maumbury. If you have not yet discovered what sort of man he is, I have a better acquaintance with him. You must get away from him at once."

Bathia's astonishment, written very plainly in rounded eyes and the parted oval of her lips, prevented her from immediately resenting his pressure on her wrist.

" Arrested ? " she repeated. " Why ? "

" They accuse me of stealing a horse."

She winced a little, then recovered herself, and tried to throw off his clasp. She would have forced herself to question him further, but his eyes, no longer either darkly passionate or appealing in a shamed humility, never left her face. And the strange new quality, apparent not only in them, but in the whole figure of the man, in his every tone and gesture—a kind of sustained dignity that seemed as if it must needs have its way with no aid from force or vehemence—this subtle power influenced her against her will, and drew her mind to his. In all their previous relations he had never yet tried to dominate her. Nor was there now any conscious effort on his part; only the steady faith in himself born of his knowledge of his peril and her need.

Bathia forgot her questioning. The cause seemed nothing; the result all. She wavered.

He saw it, but without surprise.

" You must tell me more," she said. " No ! I will not come. You ask a thing impossible. . . . Why should I go with you ? "

" To protect your own happiness; possibly, your own honour."

" Sir ! that is in my own hands."

" That is why you will come with me."

She knitted her brows for a moment over that. Then asked :

" Where do you wish to take me ? "

" To a good friend of mine at Southampton. There are women in his house. He will take care of you after I have left you. You need not be afraid to trust him."

She waived aside his last assurance, but questioned him eagerly as to his previous one.

"You intend to leave me as soon as the journey is done?"

She was jeopardizing his plans, his liberty, his life itself, by her delays—yet he was patient with her, and gave scarcely a thought to his own added peril.

"I swear it by all I hold sacred," he replied. "I will not intrude upon you during the journey more than is necessary, and I will leave you at the journey's end. If I break my word, you can easily rid yourself of me. You need only inform the nearest constable who I am, and what I am accused of, and you will very speedily be relieved of my presence. Are you ready?"

"You mean that I could betray you?"

"If I became troublesome to you—yes."

Bathia suddenly shivered from head to foot.

"I should not do that," she said. And paused. A bright flush crimsoned her face from chin to brow. After all, this was precisely what she had done. Looking at him now, in the pale light, as he stood there with his dominant eyes and drawn features, she began for the first time to doubt the morality of her self-defensive act.

"Don't look at me so!" she cried on a sudden, for very surely his compelling gaze was weakening her resolution, and she felt almost dizzy beneath its power. "Oh! will you never leave me alone?"

"At Southampton," said he. "Unless they drag me from your side before. In that case—and it may arise at any moment—go to——"

"Oh, have done with your importunities!" cried she. "You urge me to a greater folly than I have committed yet!"

"I only ask you to bear with me for a very short time. If you delay much longer——"

"Since you say you are in danger," interrupted Bathia with deliberate cruelty, "why don't you make your escape good instead of lingering here?"

"I have told you why. I do not leave this cottage without you."

"Heaven grant me patience!" cried she with a stamp of her foot. Then her haughty young head drooped, and slowly, half in unwillingness, half in shame, she held out her hand.

"Give me the cloak," she murmured sullenly.

He placed it across her shoulders in silence. There was neither mockery nor triumph in his manner of doing so. Yet he had mastered her, broken down her resistence in a way she would not have thought possible an hour ago—bent her will to his, called from the depths of his personality to her obedience, and in her own despite she had responded to the call. And Bathia knew that he realized this as clearly as she did herself. The knowledge did not make for a perfect allegiance. Yet where was the use of struggling longer? He would only conquer again!

She fastened the cloak with trembling fingers, and finished her dressing in a peevish silence. She laid a few coins on the table for the owner of the house, and turning suddenly found Demas waiting by the door. Struck anew by the change in him, the outward expression of his inward dignity and self-control, perhaps of something even finer than either of these, a frenzy of revivified antagonism swayed her to an extreme which she afterwards regretted. It was the outcome of an attempt to readjust their respective positions—the balance having inclined too palpably towards his side.

"I am in a poor case indeed," said she, "when I must needs choose between Lord Maumbury and you—between the hound and the whipped cur! But I will come—since I find no better way."

He opened the door in silence. It was hours before she saw his face plainly again, and the impression became burnt in upon her mind that it must still be bearing the look which her words had set upon it. Before the night was over she was wishing that he had struck her. The blow would have been easier to bear than the way in which he had taken her futile attempt to reinstate her own dignity.

Outside the door Demas spoke.

"We must walk for the first few miles," he said. "I dare not risk a return to the town. As soon as we can safely hire a conveyance of some sort, we will do so. We will try to get to Moreton to-night. But if you are tired before we reach there, please let me know. I shall not address you unless it is necessary. Do you understand?"

"Yes. . . . It is very dark. Do you know the way?"

"I can find it, I believe. And the moon will be up later on. Are you cold?"

"No. But you are walking very fast. I can't keep up with you."

"I am sorry. But we must go quickly."

"I shall fall," she said stubbornly.

"Will you take my hand?"

"Yes . . . no . . . I think I had better, perhaps. Yes, I will."

And so, for the first time since their marriage morning, their hands met, bare palm against bare palm. And now, as in the church at Parley, the touch of his burnt her like a flame. Yet its clasp was strong and steady, and had she hated him less, she told herself, it would even have been comforting.

In such fashion they crossed the first bridge out of the town, and faced the silent highway together.

VIII

THE STRANGE JOURNEY

THE towns of Dorchester and Southampton lie some forty-eight miles apart. In the ordinary way, the distance might have been covered easily in a day. But as Demas and Bathia performed the journey it occupied the best part of a week.

A strange full week to the woman; a time of experiences and varying emotions; of alarms and excitements, alternating with long heavy periods of inaction, when to go forward was dangerous, to sit still a torment. For travelling so, at the side of a man fleeing from justice—although the greater issue was still hidden from her—it was inevitable that Bathia should insensibly catch the contagion of his own suppressed moods, and grow wary or apprehensive as the need arose. Inevitable, too, that she should fall into the habit of looking into his face when every brief absence brought them together again, in order to read the latest intelligence which he had gained. In this way she obtained a better grasp of the conditions of their progress than she could have learned from his tongue alone. For Demas, in accordance with his promise, seldom addressed her and made few references to the reason of this strange journey of theirs.

There were other things which she might have seen, had she cared to recognize them. But a half-perception made her close her heart and remember her own wrongs. After all, why was she journeying thus at all?—creeping along the dry roads at dusk, seeking shelter in out of the way inns or cottages at night; even hiding on the lee-side of sparsely budding hedgerows for hours together. Only because she was an outcast without a home, this man's wedded wife, whom he had a right to drag about the country at his will. Such reflections came in plenty to fill the intervals between her rare glances at the haggard face moving on at her side.

Once, when they had been walking forward in their customary silence along a quiet lane, he suggested a halt, and Bathia looked at him in surprise, for they had not been more than an hour upon the road. It was towards the end of the second day, and his plan had been to reach a small outlying village before nightfall. Which place was still several miles away.

"I suppose you know best," she said. "But I should have thought—— "

"We have left the more immediate danger behind us," he answered. "Shaken it off, I think, by now."

Bathia sat down on the bank, and began pettishly to trace figures with the toe of her shoe—a dainty covering for indoor wear, and already showing signs of its present rough usage.

"I wish," said she, "that you would not so frequently refer to this danger of yours as though it were mine as well."

Demas was resting against the bank a little distance away, his chin in his palm, his eyes on the gritty roadway between his feet. He shrugged his shoulders without raising his head.

"I thought I had explained to you that it is," he told her.

"Oh—that! . . . I wonder if I was so very wise to come," murmured she.

In her heart she knew that, were the decision to be made again under the same conditions, her will would once more be subject to his. The conviction irked her. As did his silence, and apparent calm. She cast about for the means of rousing him, glancing sharply at him meanwhile. His face she could not see.

"Why don't you speak?" she cried impatiently.

He turned to her after a moment. She had an odd impression that he had just smoothed some uneasy emotion or other from his features. The look he gave her told her nothing in itself.

"I'm sorry you have had so much discomfort to put up with," he said. "We have got through the worst of it, I hope. We will try to travel in a better fashion for the rest of the way."

"I'm sure any way would be better than walking. Look at my shoes!"

"Ah! You must get some more; something stouter, of course. Have you any money left?"

Bathia suddenly stiffened.

"How do you know that I have had any at all?" she asked.

Demas blundered. A growing physical pain rendered his mind less clear than usual.

"Your father sent you a little, didn't he?" he said.

"And told you of it?" retorted Bathia. "For I am very sure that I did not!"

"We're getting away from the point," Demas answered in subterfuge.

"I thought we were just approaching it. Please tell me the truth. Did that money come from you?"

"Yes—since you ask me—it did."

Bathia sat silent awhile, angry of cheek and eye. Yet, since she was now a voluntary dependent upon his maintenance, to show resentment at a favour already ignorantly accepted, would expose her to an obvious retort.

"Why did you send it?" she asked.

"Because you had a right to it."

"Are you a rich man? No; you can't be."

"I am not. But I can promise you, if not luxury, at least comfort for the remainder of this journey. And afterwards—well, we will settle all that later on. But if anything happens to me before we reach Southampton, remember, you are to go straight on, and ask for Mr. Willavize at the Tudor House. He——"

"You told me all that before," cried she. "On the first night. Have you forgotten, or do you think that I have?"

"Neither," said Demas, rising. "Only, 'tis very important, you see."

They went on again. But Bathia looked at him more often after the illumination afforded during this brief halt. And by degrees the remembrance of the money which he had sent to her became less an occasion for rankling annoyance than for wonder. She had received it, as she now recalled, immediately after one of their interviews, when her biting speeches must have been still ringing in his ears, and at the very time when she had been planning his downfall. The thought was scarcely a pleasant one, and though she had an uneasy sense that presently it would have to be faced, she thrust it away to the back of her mind, and continued to study more closely this incomprehensible husband of hers.

Quiet and unobtrusive though he was, he afforded her much thought, now that she fairly allowed her mind a consideration of him as other than a stumbling-block in her way of freedom and happiness. His consideration and patience were remarkable—this last all the more so because it was plainly no natural characteristic of the man. His attentions, never pressed upon her unduly, were performed with a grace and courtesy at odd variance with his acknowledged ignorance of the ways of women. His remembrance of her most trivial likes and dislikes left no impressions of small-mindedness, though Bathia at first pretended to herself that they did.

"He would make an admirable valet or groom!" thought she. But her own finer perception gave her the lie at once.

So the week of her strange journey slipped by, and as the diminishing distance between herself and the harbour town assured her that the journey was nearly completed, she was forced to acknowledge inwardly that so far he had failed in nothing that he had promised.

They had rarely approached the coaching-road, which ran through Blandford and Poole, plunging into the thickets of the New Forest some dozen miles farther on, but had followed the less frequented tracks. Yet the comfort anticipated by Demas on Bathia's behalf had not been lacking even in these rougher ways. However poor a place discretion forced them to make a halting-spot, satisfactory meals and good fires were never wanting to her comfort. The best rooms were engaged for her, and civil attendance procured. Nor did he who won these essentials of easy travel for her share them himself. What sort of entertainment fell to his portion, Bathia did not at this time know, and a full realization came to her only by degrees.

The first hint was given a couple of days after she had drawn attention to her worn shoes. The need had been attended to at the earliest opportunity, and a wadded tippet added to the gift. Bathia, her pride chastened partly by necessity and partly by the remembrance of his former generosity—an act of which she thought with a growing shame—had accepted these favours with a kind of grudging gratitude which said little to him. But while she was still newly enjoying the additions to her physical comfort, she chanced to ask Demas what the hour was, and had her eyes upon him as his hand went to the accustomed place and dropped to his side empty.

"I have lost my watch," was all he said.

"How could you be so careless?" began Bathia, but as she watched his fingers adjusting his coat with the nicety of nervousness and caught a gleam of white linen for all his care, her eyes ran up to his face. And instantly the colour which was suffusing his pallor became transferred to her own cheek. She knew then that she was wearing his watch and waistcoat on her feet and shoulders. Some impulsive words sprang to her lips, but already he had turned away, and a new kind of humiliation kept her from referring to the matter again.

Very soon she would have gladly forfeited her bodily comfort for a more bearable condition of mind. She no longer asked herself what she had done that she should be forced to take this fugitive journey at his side—but rather, whether she were not, in effect, more culpable than the ostensible criminal himself. It was a consideration to which she had paid no heed at the first setting out, but which now grew upon her with every mile. In its growth, it threatened to raise as high a barrier between these two as ever her sense of wrong had done. And Demas, mistaking the recoil of her shamed humility for suppressed anger, withdrew still farther into his reticence and unobtrusive regard.

One day—it was, with good fortune, to be their last spent entirely upon the road—impulse more than curiosity got the better of her self-entailed reserve. She had never yet heard the real history of the night when she had sent him to steal the Gift Horse at Poole. As they were waiting for the coach which, provided places could be found, was to carry them a night stage along the road, she spoke.

"Did you really take a horse, Mr. Chaldecott?" she asked with indifferent eyes fixed on the adjacent guide-post that Demas's fancy had just been converting into a gallows.

"Unfortunately, Miss Loveridge, I did."

He looked for some fresh expression of aversion on her part, but she neither altered her gaze nor position.

"Whose—may I ask?"

"Unfortunately again, one belonging to the Peverell family."

"What made you do it?" asked Bathia with conscious insincerity.

Demas made no reply for a moment. He looked down the road to where a small faint blur stood out on the dusty drab of the highway.

"If you are wondering—— " he began, and broke off to point out the approaching vehicle to her. "I am guilty technically," he said then, "but morally I am as innocent as yourself. A point upon which the law holds only one opinion, I am afraid."

"Indeed!" said Bathia faintly. "But—what do you mean?"

"It is true that I took the horse," said he. "But the idea of theft was very far from my mind. That, of course, no one except my friend will believe. But 'tis God's truth for all that. However, the blunder was mine, and I must expect to pay for it. No one is to blame."

Bathia quivered from head to foot. Demas turned slowly to look at her.

"The pity is," he went on with more impassioned feeling than he had shown since the moment of their setting out together, "—the pity is that you have had to suffer, too!"

She drew a little away from him. He mistook her reason, and at once fell back into his usual manner.

"The horse was stolen from me, in turn," he went on, to cover the awkwardness of the moment, "and afterwards recovered by—look! it will soon be here."

"Yes; I see. The horse was recovered, you say. I remember. Mrs. Woodland told me all about it. And—and—you had nothing to do with these fellows?"

"Nothing at all. They were professional thieves. You see, the horse was a valuable animal. The celebrated Maumbury Gift Horse, in fact."

"I have heard of it," murmured Bathia. Confession trembled on her tongue, but the distance between the coach and the finger-post was rapidly diminishing. She longed for him to make things easier for her, if only by direct questioning. To this end, she threw out a feeble lead.

"When did it all happen?" she asked.

He slipped adroitly round the question.

"When? I forget the exact date. Some time at the beginning of the year."

Bathia clenched her hands beneath her cloak. Her courage died down, or else her pride arose. She could not have told which.

"They will punish you if they take you, I suppose," she said. "They do punish men for stealing horses, don't they?"

"Yes—it's a serious crime under the law," said he, and stepped forward to signal to the coach.

In her soreness of spirit Bathia found time to throw a last observation across his shoulder.

"You haven't asked me whether I believe in your account of the affair," she said. And without turning his head, Demas answered:

"No. I've not asked that."

The coach drew up as if in accordance with a previous arrangement. Two men scrambled down from the roof. Demas called out:

"Any room inside, guard?"

"Two places, sir, as far as Lyndhurst."

"One for this lady, then, and an outside seat for myself. Can you manage that?"

"Very good, sir."

Demas handed Bathia into the coach, and she settled down into the corner with a tumultuous heart that dragged her impulses in a dozen different directions at once. The coach was not filled, the night-air threatened a frost, he was insufficiently clad. Yet he deliberately turned his back on the comfort of an inside place, choosing to ride in the open instead. Was it because of her? She leaned forward impulsively before the door was closed, but Demas had already moved away.

From his place on the roof he was now watching the actions of the two men who had descended from the coach. As he watched, the probable meaning, both of their presence and of their immediate occupation, turned him colder than the fleck of the chilly wind on his cheek. Yet to withdraw from the arrangement would be even more risky than to proceed, trusting to the darkness to cover him until this unexpected danger had passed.

A lanthorn had been produced, and by its light one of the men was engaged in affixing a handbill to the guide-post. When this was done, the two returned to the coach and clambered up to the roof, taking their place immediately behind the man whose description they had just been advertizing to the countryside.

"Ah! So that's what you are, then, gentlemen," said the voice of another passenger. "Dashed if I didn't suspect ye all along."

"Mum's the word," remarked one of the men. And his hot breath scorched Demas's neck as he spoke.

"Got any of they bills to put about?" queried the first speaker.

In a moment the whole of the roof of the coach was covered with fluttering slips of white paper. The lanthorn not being yet extinguished, the passengers read them by its light. One was thrust in Demas's hand across his shoulder. While he was waiting for the lanthorn, little runlets of talk tormented him from all sides.

"Two hundred guineas! Whew!—that's a handsome sum!"

"Not bad"—laconically from the man who had distributed the bills—"'tis Lord Maumbury hisself that's offering it."

"A gentlemanly young rogue, too, by all accounts."

"Ay—fair an' up-standen. One o' the sort as hangs light, and kicks a bit before he's properly put to sleep."

"Gone this way, eh?"

"That's telling, sir. Don't you ask me no questions, and I'll tell you no lies!"

"Ha, ha!"

And so at length the lanthorn came round to Demas, and he held it to the paper rustling in his trembling hand.

In his unstrung state, suffering from the continued strain of repressed emotions and constant anxiety, and struggling with every painful breath against the approaching sickness, he grew conscious of a great desire to raise the light above his head, face round, and cry aloud: Here I am! Take me! I am the young man of four-and-twenty, with the dark bright eyes and the brown complexion; with the regular features and the thick waved hair! I stole the late Lord Maumbury's Gift Horse on the night of January 11, in the present year of Grace, one thousand eight hundred and twenty-six. Take me, any one of you, and go to the present Earl of Maumbury for the blood-money. But I shall hang heavy, and not light; for my heart is as lead within me, for thinking of Her!

The wildness of his fancy passed, leaving him stiff and cold. He handed back the lanthorn, crushed the paper into his pocket, and sat in the darkness of that painful journey, wondering whether the night which preceded a man's execution could hold any greater torment than he was enduring now. Surely not. Since then, at least all the horror of hope must needs have passed away. . . .

Before the sky had lifted for the dawn, Lyndhurst was reached, and still a free man, Demas bade goodbye to his fellow-travellers in an even voice, and descended from the roof. The coach had only to change horses before proceeding, and the two fugitives waited in the darker corners of the inn-yard until it had driven away. By a fortunate happening, the man who carried the handbills had fallen asleep in his seat, and the pommelling of his companion had failed to arouse him in time to a sense of his duty, and the passengers had not left their places. Therefore, the people of the inn might be trusted not to recognize a man of whom they had never heard.

"The journey is nearly over," said Demas. "Only one more stage for us. We will travel by chaise as soon as you have rested, and shall be at Southampton before noon."

"Why didn't we go on by the coach?" asked the sleepy Bathia.

"Because it wouldn't have been safe to travel in public in the daytime," said he.

"Oh! . . . how I hate this sort of thing!" she broke out pettishly.

"You won't have much more of it," Demas answered as he led her inside the inn.

A yawning chambermaid took charge of her, and soon she was lying half-dressed on a bed in the best room in the house. But though her jaded limbs and tired head found the softness that lapped her round exceedingly welcome, sleep would not come. Over and over again she rehearsed the scene by the guide-post; Demas, in effect, refusing to help her to make her confession, that confession alternately burning on her tongue, and choking her utterance. Their very words rolled round and round in her weary mind until the grey light brightened to the fulness of a cloudless day.

From the time of their entering an inn or any place of rest, until the moment of their leaving it, Demas disappeared from her sight. Hitherto, she had regarded his absence as one of the things which he had promised and she had a right to expect. But this morning she was conscious of a sense of disappointment—unreasonable yet unmistakeable—when she entered the small private room where a table was spread for breakfast, and found it empty. Examining the table, she saw that, as usual, it was laid for one alone.

Bathia sat down, resting her chin in the cup of her hand, and thought.

The trivial yet suggestive fact which was occupying her mind at the moment was that she and Demas had never shared a meal together. Even on the wedding-day, she had sat down to what should have been the bridal-feast, alone. In the present instance, the seeming neglect merely implied an excess of consideration, and with that she could scarcely quarrel. But surely there was no need for him to carry a promise to such a limit of scrupulousness. And with this, Bathia felt very ready to disagree.

Her breakfast was brought in, and after a few moments' hesitation her emotions broke into impulsive speech.

"Where is the—where is he who came in with me?" she asked.

"Your groom, ma'am? Shall I tell him you want to see him?"

"Yes; no—please do not disturb him," said she faintly.

"I'll ask about him, ma'am."

"Very well," agreed Bathia.

She lingered over the meal, but had nearly finished when the maid returned with the information for which she had been waiting.

"The young man bought himself twopen'orth of bread, ma'am, and asked leave to lay down in the coach-house for a bit."

Bathia finished her meal then and there. Not another crumb would she swallow. The situation was being carried to excess; she was tried beyond her patience—had she ever urged such folly?—expected such an over-refining of remorse and atonement? As soon as the girl had withdrawn, Bathia ran to the door and down to the ground floor of the inn. A few yards along a flagged passage brought her into the open air. A stable and a coach-house faced her side by side.

She crossed the yard quickly and finding the door of the larger building unlatched, pushed it open and looked in. The place was of a customary dimness, but the light from outside followed her as she stepped within, and showed her the object of her search lying where the fan-like ray fell full upon his form. As he neither moved nor spoke, she concluded that he was sleeping, and she moved slowly across to him, standing a little on one side, that her shadow should not interfere with her sight.

Demas lay upon a heap of clean straw, asleep indeed, but breathing with short quick gasps. His face was flushed to a rich dusky brown, yet at moments his whole body was shaken by violent shivering. One hand clutched the clothing on the right side of his breast. He remained unconscious of the intruding presence.

Bathia, neither in her own healthy young body nor among her companions in her father's house, had had any experience of sickness. Nor, in accordance with her peculiar education, had the most commonplace facts of physical health been laid before her. But now her ignorance joined hands with intuition and became knowledge. Her husband was ill—had possibly been ill for some time. Why had he not told her? Why had he persisted in pressing forward when a day's rest would have been desirable?

She stood there hesitating awhile. But as he did not wake, she became less willing to disturb him, and finally went away as silently as she had come. Possibly, he was not so happy in a conscious state that he would thank her for recalling him to it. In the doorway she turned and looked back. After they parted at Southampton she supposed that in any case she would never see him again. Strange occurrence!—he had crossed her life to so little good purpose for either of them, and would pass out of it again to even less.

Upstairs, she ordered fresh coffee and set it down by the fire against his coming. Then she thought and waited. Presently he did come, and she marvelled at him. Save for the flush which still lingered on his dark cheek, she had only her remembrance of the coach-house to assure her that he was ailing in no inconsiderable degree. Their eyes met. Bathia's wavered and fell.

"We must start in five minutes," said he. "Are you ready, Miss Loveridge?"

She ignored the question, but responded out of the fund of new emotions within her.

"Five minutes!" she exclaimed. "You have not much time for breakfast, then."

"I have breakfasted," said he.

"On two pennyworth of bread!" Bathia flashed out. "In a coach-house! Why do you do such things?"

"Since when have you been watching me, Miss Loveridge?" he asked quickly. "Surely it is ungenerous!"

"I cannot help hearing what I am told," she retorted. "But I have kept some coffee for you—if you will have it."

He took the cup from her in silence. It was inevitable that the incident should remind both of its counterpart on the wedding-day. Bathia regarded him with a softened look. Her heart began to beat quickly. The burden of her unspoken confession lay heavily upon it. This seemed the moment for its expression, could she bring her courage to the task.

From below sounds arose, increasing in volume and activity. The chaise which was to carry them on the final stage of their journey was being brought round. The minutes of grace ticked slowly away. And every second deepened her conviction that, did she allow this opportunity to pass, another one would not come to her. He would go away, leaving her unblamed. Something within her perplexed heart revolted at the thought. She thought that it was her sense of justice, but it was more than that.

Two minutes left. He had finished the coffee and was laying the cup down. It was the moment for which she had been waiting.

"Mr. Chaldecott!"

"Yes, Miss Loveridge?"

"You have gone to a great deal of trouble on my account. I wonder whether you would have done so if you had known that you had to thank me for the greatest trouble of all."

"I'm afraid I don't quite understand you."

She flung out her hand.

"For—all this," said she.

"You?"

"Didn't it ever occur to you that—I meant you to steal Lord Maumbury's horse?"

He gazed at her, but said nothing. His silence was harder to face than any vituperation would have been. Because of it she went on curtly and boldly, sparing neither herself nor him.

"I did mean it. I sent you to *The Antelope*. I arranged it all. When my plans went astray I was vexed—disappointed. I wanted to get rid of you. They told me that men were sent overseas for such thefts, and I thought that if you were caught and sent away, you would never trouble me any more. It was not that I wanted to punish you for what you had done, as I wanted to punish Lord Maumbury. Only I wanted to feel sure, quite sure, that you had gone out of my life for ever."

Still he said nothing, but the dark gaze of his eyes almost frightened her. She forgot that he had ever been the sinner, and although she yearned to ask for his forgiveness, in the face of that silence and that gaze contrition was dumb.

"As for him—Gervis Peverell—" she went on, the evenness of her manner broken now by a note of contempt "—I said that I would make him regret his first rejection of me—the lie he had told—the insult to my woman's pride. And so I tried to make him care for me. And when it seemed I had succeeded, I was very glad to be able to throw his love back in his face—for indeed, indeed, he is nothing to me!" protested Bathia with fatal earnestness. "Oh! believe that, I entreat you—nothing at all!"

Demas spoke.

"You mean that you wanted to break his heart?"

"If I could!" cried she readily enough. "To make him suffer, at any rate!"

"And what of me?" Demas asked.

Bathia faltered for the first time.

"I have told you; I have explained that I——"

"What of my heart?" he demanded, never moving his gaze. "What of mine, I say?"

She drooped still more. Once again his masterful personality was absorbing her more tender femininity. But now she had no resentment, no rebellion because of it. Rather she loved to have it so. And answer she must, with that compelling question in her ears.

"I—I did not think of that," she murmured; "no—not at all."

With the words her own eyes fell. His face, at her answer, she did not see. But presently, breaking an interval filled with the rattling of chains and the stamping of hoofs, she heard him speaking again.

"I see. I was only the whipped cur to you always, and my heart was not worth the trouble of breaking."

He drew a quick breath that sounded like a sigh, and—

"I think the chaise is ready," he said heavily, and turned to leave the room.

Bathia took an impulsive step forward.

"Mr. Chaldecott!"

"Don't speak of it again," he said without looking back. "It's over and done with."

But to Bathia it seemed that it was only just beginning.

IX

THE END OF THE JOURNEY

At a certain point on the long white road Demas stopped the chaise for no apparent reason, and opening the door left it in a somewhat awkward manner.

Bathia, watching him covertly from her corner, sat up wondering. She heard his directions to the post-boy, and wondered still more. This time a chill sense of alarm was mingled with her surprise.

"Drive on slowly to the next milestone," Demas said, "and wait for me there."

And the post-boy, with his chin on his shoulder, jogged leisurely on without him.

They were the first words he had spoken since they had taken places as far apart from each other as possible in the vehicle. Nor had she dared to look at him openly, lest she should find his eyes on her face. But as each furtive glance made it apparent that she need have no such fear, her spirits flagged still more. She was unforgiven, she told herself, striving to infuse a spurt of anger into what was in essence a lamentation. Presently her lip trembled, and she began to see the country through which they were travelling only as a blurred haze which had no meaning for her inner consciousness at all. And soon afterwards Demas gave the order which left her alone.

But now, when she might have well indulged her disappointment, mortification, remorse—or whatever sentiment it was which distressed her so mightily—she suddenly became clear-eyed and alert. Yet her miserable state of mind had only changed its quality, and not its degree.

Why had he left her in so abrupt a manner? Never yet had he made a plan or altered one, without advising her of the arrangement, even though he frequently withheld the reason. This curt and sudden departure, temporary though he had implied it to be, had so much of the elements of a desertion that Bathia read an ironic meaning into those last words of his; and the conviction grew in her mind that he did not intend to return.

Pride made a vigorous appeal. But in the face of threatened destitution, bewilderment, and a loneliness which weighed down her heart more appallingly still, Bathia could not afford to dally with the situation. She let down the window on her side of the chaise, and looked back along the road. Then her heart gave a bound, and her cheeks grew very hot. Whatever might be the explanation of his act, desertion was surely no part of it.

The day was one of clear rain-washed air, the country through which they were travelling was flat and open, the road lay behind like a white ribbon. Distant objects stood out with a clarity unknown in a warmer atmosphere, and the chaise was creeping forward very slowly. Demas had dropped not more than a quarter of a mile behind. At that point a tiny bridge of planks crossed a roadside stream, and where the post of the handrail was driven in a small bank of earth had been thrown up. Across this Demas was now lying, his face pressed into the turf which covered it, very still and heedless it seemed to the anxious girl who regarded him from a slowly increasing distance.

Resolve became crystallized into action. She, too, bade the post-boy halt, and disregarding his suspicious stare left the chaise.

Very swiftly she covered the yards which separated her from her husband, and as she went she found that that appellation dwelt in her mind for the first time without bitterness. Coming to his side, she stood silent for a moment, watching him, as she had done a few hours earlier.

"Mr. Chaldecott!" she cried then. "You are very ill!"

He started up, showing a flushed and nervous face, dry-lipped and wide-eyed.

"You are ill!" repeated Bathia. "Why didn't you tell me before?"

"Because I hoped you wouldn't know," answered Demas, who had hidden his pain until the conviction that further concealment was impossible had driven him from her presence.

" What is it ? " she asked. " And why—why shouldn't I know ? "

He gave her no reply to either question, but clutching the post beside him got slowly to his feet.

" Since you have found it out," he said with quick breathing, " there is nothing to wait for. Let us go back to the chaise."

" Yes. Let us go back," she repeated with a dull sense that her anxiety was being thrown again into her own bosom. Then her intelligence re-asserted itself. " No ! Wait, and I will fetch it to you."

But the post-boy was already returning unbidden, so that Bathia found an excuse for remaining for a brief space longer in this new and not displeasing intimacy with the man whom she had hated.

" When we get to the next inn," she said tremulously, " you must rest until you are well again."

Demas shook his head.

" We daren't risk that," he said. " We must push on quickly."

" Why ? " she asked, resentful at his constant unsparing of himself. " A day or so can't make much difference, surely."

" An hour or so may make all the difference in the world," Demas answered. " I am liable to arrest at any moment."

" More than you have been all along ? " she asked quickly.

" Much more. And I must see you in safety before that happens."

Her heart leapt at the words; even his matter-of-fact way of speaking them gave them value in her eyes. He still thought of her !—and regarded such thought as a natural thing.

" If it does happen," Demas went on with an earnestness undimmed by pain, " and they leave you free—— "

" Leave me free ? " she repeated, wondering.

" If they don't take you back to Dorchester by force," he explained, giving at last verbal expression to a fear which had troubled him throughout it all. " Lord Maumbury is capable of anything," he added.

" I believe that," said Bathia with a shudder.

Demas regarded her for a silent moment, very thoughtful and still.

" Perhaps," he went on, " I had better impress upon you a fact which I always meant to urge before we parted, but which I have delayed speaking about lest you should misunderstand me and worry yourself in vain. It is this : our marriage was a perfectly legal union, in spite of certain irregularities. As long as I live, you cannot become the wife of another man. As you value your honour, don't let anyone persuade you otherwise."

"I will remember it," she said firmly, but without the flash of temper which he had looked for. "I will remember it—always."

The carriage drew near, wheeled, and halted beside them. Bathia sprang up. With a certain daring she repeated his own words uttered at the beginning of their journey.

"Will you take my hand?"—and so helped him into his place.

But they did not leave the chaise in the manner anticipated by Bathia and so earnestly desired by Demas himself. A rapid trot of some dozen miles brought them at length into the seaport. But arrived at the house which had, through all their dubious wanderings, stood in the minds of each for harbourage and succour, they found its door locked and barred against them, the owner and servants alike absent, and all neighbourly intelligence of the vaguest quality.

"We'll go to *The Dolphin Inn*," said Demas, returning to the waiting Bathia, and endeavouring to conceal his disappointment and dismay. "Then I will see what I had better do."

And Bathia gave a tremulous acquiescence. This unexpected complication had brought her to the verge of tears.

Accordingly, a few minutes later, the chaise rattled along the High Street and turned in at the low arched entrance to the inn.

The yard was long and narrow, partially flagged, and overshadowed by the upper storeys of the buildings through which it ran, channel-wise, to the stables at the end. Its lack of the customary width made it gloomy even on this bright March day, and in spite of the fact that many doors and windows opened on to it from both sides. Since it boasted antiquity, it must needs have welcomed all shades of emotions grave and gay, but Bathia Chaldecott, raising heavy eyes to the ancient and blackened timberwork above her head, wondered whether such a complexity of feeling had ever tortured a human heart within its precincts before.

To linger was dangerous. Demas hurried her inside, and gave a few orders. Then, according to his habit, he turned away. Bathia put out a deprecatory hand.

"Aren't you coming back?" she asked.

They looked at one another. Bathia drooped.

" When I have settled with the post-boy," said he, and left her.

He returned to the yard. The lad who had driven them was standing there talking to a stranger. Both swung round as Demas appeared. Another man stepped nimbly out from a doorway, and gripped him by the wrist and shoulder.

" Your name's Demas Chaldecott," said he, " and in name o' the Crown I arrest you on a charge of horse-stealing. And I furthermore warns ye . . . ."

Demas was not listening. The shock had chilled even his feverish blood for the moment. He felt strangely cool and collected. His eyes fixed themselves accusingly upon the post-boy, who shrank before their passionate gaze, and fell to muttering that a chap must do the best for hisself; that two hunnerd guineas was two hunnerd, and many a feller had made a fortin out o' less.

" . . . and, now then, will 'ee come quiet, or must we use force ? " finished the constable's peroration.

Demas's eyes came back, the angry light in them slowly dying away.

" I'll come with you quietly, if you allow me a few words with my wife, who is inside the inn."

" Out o' order," pronounced the man, but the exchanging of a coin perverted his judgment, and, signing to his companion, the two escorted their prisoner up the staircase towards the room which Demas had just left. Bathia, warming her hands at the fire, looked round at the sound of approaching footsteps, and seeing, rose up from her knees, and stood, her eyes blank with horror.

It was the consummation of her wild self-protective scheming that she was regarding—and her heart stood still at the sight.

At the door the two men paused, falling into alert attitudes, but allowing Demas to go forward alone. He advanced to the table, and stood there motionless. So, for a moment, they looked at each other, with that barrier between them. Then Demas spoke.

" I have been arrested," he said with no attempt to keep any part of what he had to say from the men at the door. " You need not be alarmed, however. You will be safe here until Mr. Willavize returns, provided you refuse to trust either Lord Maumbury's spoken or written word. Under no consideration are you to pay any heed to whatever persuasions or inducements he may bring forward in order to make you leave this place."

" I will not," said Bathia with stiff lips. She could have said no less had her inclination urged her otherwise. Once again his compelling force was strong upon her will. But now resentment had no place in her acceptance of the fact.

" I hope you will not have long to wait," Demas went on. " I will get into communication with Mr. Willavize as soon as I can, and send him to you. Don't leave here until he takes you away. You can trust him utterly."

" I will," whispered Bathia.

" You will want some money. I will give you what I can." He laid a few notes and coins on the table. " I wish it was more," he said. " But I must keep enough for my letter. Remember what I have said about Lord Maumbury—if he uses his brother's name as an inducement, treat any statement of his as a lie."

" Yes," said Bathia, comprehending nothing of his allusion, but enough of his situation to make inquiry as to the reference a triviality. " Yes, I will remember all you say."

" Time ! " cried one of the men at the door, and took a step forward.

" One moment ! " said Demas without turning his head. He leant forward a little, resting his hot fingers on the edge of the table and never moving his eyes from her face. Bathia waited, scarcely breathing. So impersonal a thing had her own identity suddenly become, that she seemed to be standing on the other side of the table, seeing herself as he must be seeing her, and marvelling at so cold and unresponsive a thing.

But he was speaking once more, and now he, too, had apparently passed beyond the conception of occasion and place, and the issue of the moment was to these two alone.

" In a short time I shall probably have passed out of your life," he said—and it seemed to her that his soul would have conveyed the sense of his words to her, had his lips remained mute. " In that case, you will soon cease to remember me. But if, before you do, you can give me one kindly thought, I think that I shall know it . . . wherever I am."

With him, in spirit, she was across the table still; hand in hand now, gazing, at his side, in amazed resentment at the cold statue-like woman who gave no sign and uttered no word. With him, she felt the chill of horror imminent and overshadowing, and, with him, for one bleak uncomprehending second, she gazed into the unveiled face of Death.

Physical faintness seized her. Her eyes closed. Sounds grew muffled; her gripping fingers relaxed their hold. Her own identity came back with the shock of newly-stirring blood in a numbed limb. She was on her own side of the barrier, after all, and they were taking him away.

With a little gasp she ran across the room. A crowd blocked the narrow stairway. Trembling, yet with nerves of steel, she forced her way through. Down in the narrow courtyard a closed vehicle was waiting. She caught sight of him among the group of idlers and onlookers, taller than the rest, with an unbent head which he never turned, so that she could not see his face. But at the last a little parting of the crowd gave her a fuller view, and she saw the glitter of steel at his wrists, and the brutal kick which sent him stumbling into the chaise. After that she saw no more, for the carriage was driven quickly away.

"Gone!"

She shaped the word to herself, and had never known until that moment how much blank despair and pain could hang upon so small a sound.

Gone! Out of her life, as he had said: as she had wished and planned. Did she wish it now? What folly to ask it—what cruelty to press the question home! But her unsparing conscience forced it on her, and her sobbing heart made eager denial, while the busy tongues clattered and clashed about her in a babel of meaningless sounds.

Gone.

Not theirs; yet they had taken him away. Hers; yet she had sent him—to what? Oh, that she knew more of this bewildering world into which she had plunged so recklessly! Was there no one to enlighten her, that she might soothe that tremulous heart of hers, or stab it to fresh pain?

There were many, had she listened to the distracting voices. But that same quality drove her past the talkers, and up the stairs, back to the room whence they had taken him.

She ran across it to his side of the table, fell upon her knees with her cheek upon the little pile of notes and silver, and burst into tears. No woman of stone confronted her now. She was herself at last, yearning, tender, remorseful. Such a Bathia as he had once dreamed of; such a Bathia as he had never known. . . . .

A maid coming in presently with the meal which Demas had ordered for her found her so, and, unaware of the connection between the two, warmed to loquacious sympathy at once.

"To be sure, ma'am," babbled she while Bathia struggled for composure, "it do fair give you a turn to think of a fine young feller like that bein' scragged. It made me feel fluttery-like, I'm sure, ma'am."

"What do you mean?" asked Bathia faintly.

"Well, ma'am, they say as he's stolen a hoss, and your ladyship knows what that means, o' course."

"I do not," said Bathia; adding bravely, "Tell me; I want to know. Nothing—nothing dreadful, I hope."

The girl stared.

"Well," she explained with the bluntness of her class, "they'll hang him if 'tis proved. And proved 'twill be; you may make sure o' that. It always is."

"They'll—hang him?" gasped Bathia, white-faced and trembling. "Oh, no, no, no! Surely not that! Not that!"

"Oh, yes, indeed, ma'am. They always hang hoss-thieves, you see. If he's lucky, he may get transported instead. But, la! I don't know which be worse. The pity is, if he do come to the gallus, he'll suffer a bit afore he dies, chokin' by inches as you may say, ma'am, not bein' stout enough to go off easy, same as them heavier chaps do."

Bathia flung her hands up to her ears.

"Oh, stop, stop, stop!" she railed. "I won't listen to such hideous talk! 'Tis not true! Oh, God in Heaven—tell me it's not true!"

But the girl only laughed, and nodded her head.

"'Tis true as Gospel," she cried, between Bathia's fingers. "But there, I've frightened you, and turned you against your meal, I'll be bound. La' bless you, ma'am, don't take on so. Werriting can't save him, poor lad. And he were sartin to be caught, for the hue-and-cry was out, and ev'ry inn in the place watched. Not to mention as the post-boy were fly to the game all the time, havin' read the handbill on a sign, afore he took on the job. There—there! Be quiet now—and take your meal like a Christian lady—do!"

The agonized Bathia pushed the girl aside.

"Leave me!" she ordered wildly. "Oh, for God's sake, leave me, or you'll drive me mad! I want nothing—only to be left alone! Go—as you hope for pardon, leave me to myself!"

So, with frantic words and frenzied gestures, she drove the maid away. But, left alone, she grew suddenly and strangely calm; her blood flowed evenly, her brain became clear.

This, then, was the meaning of it all. This was the thing that he had faced throughout the past week—this was the Death which he had seen when, a short time ago, they had stood, spirit-linked, and looked at the thing together. This! A hideous and shameful death—the reward given by the law for his guiltless attempt to do her service. Death by strangulation. A slow and torturing death.

No tears formed in her eyes. The flame behind them would have scorched them up, it seemed, had such relief been attempted. But her brain only remained the clearer to empicture, with an almost physical perception, a hundred episodes of this disastrous journey, wherein a man, young, arrogant, and undisciplined, had bent his pride to humble service that the woman who bore his name might suffer no hurt after he had left her.

And she—she herself—had brought this harm upon him; had told him so, and scarcely begged for pardon.

Suddenly she stretched out her empty arms, and, with yearning bosom and wistful eyes, made her confession to the man who could not hear.

"I did not know you. I did not understand. And you must pay with your dear life for my wickedness and pride! And perhaps you will never, never know—oh, my God!—how I love you—now!" . . . .

Somewhere in the town a bell began to ring.

PART IV

BENEFIT OF CLERGY

"Do you think that you are the only one who knows how to love and to serve?"

I

PARSON WILLAVIZE'S WOOING

JULIA TRICKETT, that once merry maid, had grown strangely tristful of late. Casting about in his mind for some set limit to the change, her guardian the parson had come to the conclusion that it had first been perceptible after the visit to Wyke Hall. Being by fits and starts a thoroughly honest man, he examined himself with a conscientiousness only distantly approached in his pre-ordination days. He readily admitted faults of temper, also dating from the same untoward visit with its tragic development.

Recalling his subsequent interview with Demas, he knew that much asperity towards the young fellow had mingled with a very genuine sympathy on his behalf. Both sentiments arose from the same cause, and the cause lay with the dead earl, whose failure to leave his worldly affairs in order had thrown the parson off his comfortable balance. All this he acknowledged, making his admissions to a very lenient father-confessor indeed, but withholding nothing. The corollary was simple. He had been unnecessarily harsh to Julia, and she, poor innocent maid, had felt his unkindness, and was grieving over it in secret.

The solution was essentially flattering—more especially so to an elderly complacent man who had denied himself nothing that he could, with any show of decency, obtain. The next step followed, if not as a matter of course, with enough spontaneity to make it appear so. Another subtle smoothing of the way to a man who suspected at times that he was going to make a fool of himself. But if Julia, poor maid, cared as much as all that—why, certainly not! Moreover, he told himself with a chuckle, there was always the widowed Virgin to represent the acme of folly to which a pleasure-loving man might descend.

And so it fell out that on a fine windy morning at the end of February, happening to catch sight of Julia searching for early primroses in a sheltered corner of the garden, the parson clapped on his hat and strolled out to her side.

Never surely had her namesake of poetic fame looked fresher or more winsome than this simple country-girl as she bent over the delicate growth of leaves and severed the hairy pink stalks of the blossoms with discriminating fingers. Her fair hair caught and held the brilliant sunshine and gave its little loose ends to the breeze with an artless coquetry, the crisp air had sent a fine glow into her rounded cheeks. When she raised her eyes at the parson's approach they showed, for a moment at least, all their old unconscious archness and candour.

" Hang it all ! " thought Willavize " —why the devil shouldn't I ? "

" Not so very busy this morning, Julia, I perceive," said he.

" Mrs. Virgin sent me out for a breath o' air, sir. An' look—here's primroses in plenty ! "

" 'The rathe primrose,' meet for poets' funerals," observed the parson, and held out his hand for the posy. " Don't move, child. I have something to say to you."

All the sunshine went out of Julia's face. She rose to her feet, hugging her flowers, but looking at him with startled eyes.

" What's the matter, my girl ? " he said.

" Nothing, sir. Please go on."

" Come and sit down."

He led the way to the stone seat overlooking the water. Julia diffidently placed herself beside him, and began a nervous arrangement of the flowers. The parson interrupted the task by taking one of her hands and holding it in his own.

" Aren't you happy, Julia ? " he asked.

" Very, sir," said she, repressing a sigh. " I was—afeared you was angry with me."

" Angry ? Now what put that notion into your head ? Why should I be angry ? "

Julia said nothing, but gazed out at the dancing waters with misty blue eyes.

" Am I ever angry with you ? " remonstrated the parson serenely.

" I can't say, sir, as you ever was."

" Quite so. Now, my dear, I'm going to tell you something, so pray attend." Julia brought her peach-like face round to his. " Don't call me *sir* any more. Do you understand ? "

Julia looked indifferently surprised, but immediately responded:

"Yes, sir."

The parson squeezed her hand.

"Very well; don't forget. Now, tell me this—how would you like to be married?"

Julia's eyes opened wider still. She looked at the parson, at their locked hands, at the rippling tideway, at the adjacent sundial. Then again at her companion's face.

"Has anyone ever asked you?"

"N-no," said Julia with another sigh.

"Nor made love to you?"

"N-never, sir."

"Ah! Well, my girl, I'm not an old fellow yet, but not so youthful as I was once, and consequently I'm not so sprack at the love-making as the young blades are. Still, I'm solider. Never forget that, I'm solider."

Julia regarded his portly form and well-seasoned visage, and gave an almost eager acquiescence, the word appealing to her through its frequent use in a culinary sense by Mrs. Virgin.

"So," the parson continued, "if I don't say a damnation lot of pretty things to you, my dear, 'tisn't because I don't mean 'em. The long and the short of it is—would you like to marry me?"

"Oh!" said Julia. And again—"Oh!"

"Well? Any reason against it, my dear?"

Julia sat silent for a moment or two. Even simple minds run atilt simple problems at times, and Julia Trickett was now brought face to face with one which, to her inexperience, seemed a very great one. As always in such cases she was drawn two ways. But her simple nature was such that ambition or vanity formed no towing-rope to her inclination. That aspect of the affair bewildered and almost terrified her.

To be a parson's lady, to live in a big house not as maid but as mistress, to have money and grand friends—the bare notion of it all sent her head spinning. Because of these things alone she could never have been persuaded. Far more alluring to her was the thought of a humble cottage in the country shared with a certain gardening-lad who came in to attend to the parson's property. There was a pleasant little dream indeed! He had often smiled at her across the cabbages, and Julia had blushed responsively. If only there had been nothing else! But there was a certain matter vexing the girl's innocent mind out of all proportion to the cause.

It was the matter of her meddling with the timepiece of a real live lord—for in the perspective the offence had assumed a presumptive quality only comparable to the theft of Achan or the disobedience of Saul among the Amalekites.

To touch a thing which did not belong to one was, she had been taught, as good as to desire it; to desire unlawfully, amounted to a theft. And though she had neither stolen nor wished to steal Lord Maumbury's little French clock, her conscience hounded her through all the terrors of imagined guilt, and convicted her by its own pertinacity. Confession would have eased her soul, but, as her sense of enormity increased, confession only suggested fresh torments to her mind. And now, here was an easy way of repentance and forgiveness alike. If she did as the parson desired, she could speak more freely, and with an assurance of pardon. For Julia's creed ran that no man was ever angry with his wife.

"Well, my dear? What do you say? I think we might be very happy together, eh?"

"I—I think so, sir," murmured Julia with a gasp. "If you didn't look for me to be a fine lady all at once."

"Lord love you, child!" cried the parson, aghast, "I don't want you to be a fine lady ever! It's just because you're not that I'm marrying you."

And so ended Parson Willavize's wooing. Julia dismissed the thought of the gardening-lad with a little sigh, and tried to obey the parson by thinking of himself as Evurtius. But her transgression remaining still unconfessed, the only relief obtained lay in the contemplation of future serenity. And as new anxieties arose with her new status, her spirits failed to recover their natural buoyancy, and her cheek remained less rosy than before.

In less than a week's time, Willavize also began to consider his position, and in spite of his unabated admiration of Julia's charms was aware of a growing uneasiness. Mrs. Virgin's obvious disapproval added to his own suspicion that it was not undeserved. Other causes contributed to his dissatisfaction, and before long both women saw with unequivocal relief the customary signs which preceded the parson's departure from home. But on this occasion, old habits fell through, and in view of the girl's continued listlessness, Willavize ordered both her and Mrs. Virgin away to the neighbouring village of Millbrook for change of air during his own absence. The house was shut up, and so remained for Demas Chaldecott in his need to apply to it in vain.

II

THE WIFE

In obedience to the instructions of that hitherto neglected husband whose wish had now become her law, Bathia lived in the strictest retirement during the days which followed the arrest. Only one way did her eager feet tread daily—swift in going, lagging in retreat. This was the journey taken regularly every morning to the quaint house in the by-street near the waterside. But always she found the heavy oak door closed against her, and the shuttered windows blind to her impassioned appeal.

The constant disappointment, added to her deeper-seated distresses, weighed down the ardent young spirit that was yearning to respond buoyantly to the call of love. Yet every day, even it might be with every fresh defeat of her hopes, her love developed and her own character inevitably expanded.

She looked back with an intensity of feeling upon the various happenings of that one strange week of wandering at her husband's side, and found in each incident some new and precious sidelight upon his disposition, and something to be condemned and repudiated in her own. Against his patience she set her petulance, against his self-effacement, her self-will and grudging submission; against his masterly dignity, her own childish vexation and desire to wound and pain. And, going with infinite daring more deeply into the matter, she thought contrastingly of her initial mischief wrought against him, and his disregard of personal safety in his desire to protect herself and her honour from their common enemy.

Small wonder that after an agonizing contemplation of such undeniable facts her heart grew sick and her mind reeled before a possibility more tremendous still.

Of English law she knew nothing. Her agitated inquiries on such points as presented themselves on the surface of the present case gave her contradictory information and but little comfort. She paid a visit to the Town Gaol—and shuddered at the anomaly of erecting such an edifice on a pleasant spot overlooking the crowded waters of the harbour and the green country of the opposite shore. Here, she found, Demas had been detained for a few hours only, prior to his removal to Dorchester Gaol. Thither she would unhesitatingly have followed him, had her whole spirit not been set now to an implicit obedience and faith in his judgment.

For the rest, she heard diverse statements relative to his treatment while in prison, and the ability of his friends to alleviate his position. If he had money, he would suffer no great hardship; prisoners with plenty of "garnish" had even escaped before now—though were he so unlucky as to be retaken, he would certainly be hanged out of hand. And another would assure her that no sick man could hope to obtain sufficient care and attention to enable him to live through the time preceding his trial. The very date of the trial itself was uncertain in these uneducated minds. One told her that it depended on the 'Sizes; another, that prisoners without friends or influence often lay in gaol from one year's end to the other.

A week passed heavily by. It was well, she found, to keep her mind fixed upon these practical anxieties, terrible in their potentiality though they were. The remembrance of the part which she herself had played in his undoing, had become as a searing-iron to a conscience daily more highly sensitized by love. So, lest an hour might come when service should be asked of her, she fought against the temptation to a debilitating self-condemnation, and strove for a cooler judgment, a calmer mind.

Then, when the full round of seven days had passed by, and her time of waiting was nearly ended, an incident occurred which braced even while it agitated her, and, in revealing her material weakness, showed her own spiritual strength.

She was on the point, one morning, of setting out upon her daily journey to the Tudor House when a message was brought to her that a gentleman was waiting below, desirous of seeing her.

For a moment her flagging heart beat quickly, apprehending help at hand. She inquired the name. No name had been given.

Bathia frowned, wavered, grew pathetically curious, and finally asked what manner of man the stranger was. The answer that he was tall, good-looking, young, and well-dressed; that, moreover, the coach in which he had arrived was drawn by four horses and bore a coronet on the panels, left her in small doubt as to his identity.

Her face flamed.

"I will not see him!" she cried.

The message was conveyed to the waiting man. Immediately he sent back a rejoinder. He was exceedingly sorry to inconvenience Mrs. Chaldecott, but unless she saw her way to granting him an interview he would find it incumbent upon himself to stand in the hallway until she appeared.

Bathia appreciated the delicate insolence which underlay the courteous words, and bit her lip with vexation. It was plain to her understanding that he had learned of her periodical absences from the inn. Probably, he had divined their reason. Thrown upon the horns of a dilemma by his subtlety, she counted an interview with Demas's enemy as a lesser evil than an interference with her attempt to reach his friend.

"Show him up!" she ordered curtly, and immediately pulled off her outdoor apparel to save herself from the humiliation of admitting a frustrated design.

A glance in the mirror might have warned her of the lack of wisdom thus displayed. Relieved of the overshadowing bonnet, her fair face, glowing like a rose under the whip of her indignation, showed its charms in open allurement. To her natural beauty was now added that peculiar fascination, so irresistible to the mind of an appreciative and unscrupulous admirer of the sex—a delicate disarrangement of hair and adornments, which to another woman spells at best coquetry and at worst, mere untidiness. The chestnut curls fell loosely over her forehead, and one long strand hung out of place across the creamy whiteness of her neck. In dragging off her cloak a sleeve of her gown had been pulled up to her elbow, thereby revealing the roundness and smoothness of the arm beneath. A handkerchief thrust into the opening of her bodice had half-escaped from its secretion, and its drooping folds emphasized the graceful lines of her figure. And while her mind was still occupied with the necessity of appearing at her ease before the cultured man of the world, the door opened to admit him, and gave the sight of her charming unpreparedness to his discriminating eyes.

Instantly she covered her bared arm, and swept to her full height. Maumbury bowed, without removing his gaze from her face.

"Well, my lord?"

The words burst from her, compelled by the ardent insolence of his look and bearing.

"Well, Mrs. Chaldecott, I have found you, after all," returned he.

"So I see," said Bathia, quivering with resentment at his success.

"Did you really think it could be otherwise?" Maumbury went on, speaking with an easy assurance which inflamed her indignation anew.

"At least, I hoped it," retorted she.

Maumbury looked round. "Please be seated," he said, bringing forward a chair.

"It is not worth while," said Bathia shortly.

The man raised his eyebrows. He rested one foot on the rail of the chair which she had refused, and leant his arm across his knee. Bathia withdrew into the rounded bow window of the room, and turning her back upon him gazed down into the street. The long busy street, almost severe in its regularity, stretched away due north and south, meeting at the latter point the wharves and warehouses of the town quay, and at the other, running through the midmost arch of the Bargate, which formed the ostensible northern boundary of the town. On either side were shops and merchants' offices, broken here and there by the erection of churches and inns, which occurred as mere incidents in the general plan. The whole atmosphere of the town was mercantile, becoming more strongly imbued with maritime attributes the further south one advanced.

The place of Bathia's harbourage stood near enough to the lower end of the town to catch this aspect of environment. It was sufficiently pronounced to remind the desolate girl of the quayside inn where Demas had made his confession, and shocked her susceptibilities from timorous confidence into distrust and aversion. Up to that point she blamed him still; but thence onward, her condemnation was for herself alone.

It was market-day in the town. Droves of cattle moved along the street, and by the side of the pavement booths and stalls had been erected for the sale of the multifarious trifles associated with such events in the rustic mind. Crowds of country folk from the outlying districts made slow and digressive progress before Bathia's eyes, and the stolidity and indifference inseparable from a coalescent mass of human beings was conveyed to her with double force in her own isolated position.

Suddenly the man behind her laughed.

"On my soul," he said, "your wits have sharpened, Mrs. Chaldecott! You are no longer the shy country miss. Perhaps your recent association with our friend the schoolmaster has enlarged your powers of repartee."

"Please do not refer to my husband," cried Bathia. "I have no intention of discussing him with you."

"That's better," said Maumbury coolly. "I thought I could make you look at me. No, hang it!—that's the wrong thing to say. 'Tis I who want to look at you."

"I have heard," said Bathia, flashing her face away, "that Want is a very good—schoolmaster, my lord!"

"Good again! Excellent!" cried Maumbury, and came to her side.

"Why did you run off like that?" he asked. "Think what a devil of a hole I was in. So much legal procedure to attend to; my brother, with his usual lack of consideration, thrown sick on my hands, the man who'd stolen my horse escaped, and you disappeared as well. Though, I assure you honestly, it never occurred to me to associate your flight with his. Even now, I'm at a loss to understand what it all means."

"Surely," answered she, "a wife's place is by her husband in his time of need."

"Oh, come now," returned Maumbury with a curl of his upper lip, "isn't it time that farce was ended? You've let the villain deceive you long enough."

"What farce?" demanded Bathia. "God knows my life is earnest enough at present! And as to villains—I think, my lord, that you could play that part yourself very cleverly."

"Your sex, and still more your charming personality, preserves you from discourtesy," replied he, "but if you were other than what, thank heaven, you are, I'm afraid I should be uncivil. Do you really mean to say that this scoundrel Chaldecott, a fellow who's already been shamefully flogged, and is now on the high road to being hanged, has made you believe that you are really his wife?"

"I know that I am," said Bathia steadily.

"It's incredible that you can be so innocent! You are not, I see, so sophisticated as I feared. Think for a moment! That marriage of yours—you believed this Demas Chaldecott to be my brother, did you not?"

"That is true," said Bathia.

"And married him as such?"

"I married a man, my lord, and not a name."

"Pardon me—that's mere casuistry. Names, in all legal matters, are considered of the highest importance, I must tell you. Do you suppose that if a man put a false name to his will, it would stand in a court of law?"

"I have never thought about such a matter," returned the unshaken Bathia. "And I cannot argue with you, Lord Maumbury. Please leave me alone."

"But that is just what I am not prepared to do," objected he. "I have taken a long journey at an inconvenient time for the sake of seeing you——"

" And disproving my marriage! You waited, I understand, until the man who would have known better than I how to answer this insolence, is safely out of the way and unable to throw your lies back in your face."

Maumbury flushed darkly. Her words gave him a vivid reminder that that man had already flung his falsity in his teeth and set the seal of his treachery upon his cheek.

" Yes—damn him!—he's counted out," he rejoined with a touch of savagery. " He'll not interfere with me any more. And you'll soon find, my dear one, that it won't be thought much glory or credit to be associated with him even in such a loose way as a mock-marriage. At best, they'll be calling you a hempen widow before very long."

Before his scarcely concealed brutality Bathia quailed for the first time. Her eyes fell, and her wistful mouth appealed for the pity which it was not in her companion to give.

" You are very merciless, my lord," she said.

" Not as much as you are. Can you deny that you favoured me, drew me on with every womanly art, at the first? Why have you changed, Bathia mine? "

" Have I changed? Less than you think! I never cared for you."

" Yet you made me believe so—once! "

She crimsoned with sudden shame.

" I admit it," she said honestly. " I did wrong—even to you. It was a trick. I am sorry for it. But, oh, my lord, if you are a man of the least generosity, you'll cease your reproaches, and leave me to the punishment of my own misery now."

He caught her up sharply.

" Your misery? " he cried. " What misery have you to bear, compared with mine? What Peverell was there yet who failed to win the woman he desired, whether a tinker or a prince stood in his way? Doesn't ambition move you? Do riches and titles count for nothing in your eyes? "

" For nothing at all," she said. And added softly—" There are other things."

" What things? " he asked.

" Honour and—love."

" Oh!—heroics! Come, Bathia, don't talk like the green schoolgirl which even in your country days you never were. I'm in no mood to trifle with abstract sentiments. Since you are so foolishly and erroneously obdurate on the point of your marriage with Chaldecott, I'll humour you and waive all pretensions until he's out of the way. Come—will you marry me as soon as he's dead?"

The easy confidence of the implied assertion no less than the sheer brutality of the words sent the blood from her cheek. She turned her sick gaze round the room. Most of all she looked at the table. Before it she saw again the object of her newly awakened love, already stricken with physical pain and with the doom of the prison upon him. She looked again into his earnest eyes as he gave her his last instructions and laid before her the coins which he could so ill spare—saw his final glance as he made his last appeal—so poorly understood!—saw him turn away. From weakness she passed to strength, and so found courage to answer the man at her side—to answer him with a new pride of bearing that deepened his desire for possession a hundredfold.

"I spoke just now," she said, "of two things. Two reasons why we must remain for ever apart. Granted the honourableness of your last proposal, my lord, there is another consideration, you remember."

He bit his lip, reddened slightly, and looked surprised. Then he recovered himself and laughed.

"I ask your pardon. My memory is a poor one for details when I am much moved. Please explain. What is this other weighty reason of yours?"

"A very simple one," answered she. "I love my husband."

Maumbury laughed outright.

"Absurd!" he cried. "A peerless creature like you can't stoop to love a beggarly horse-stealer!"

"I have told you the truth," said Bathia, and looking into her earnest eyes, he knew that it was impossible to jest her statement to death. He lost command of his temper slightly.

"It is none the less absurd," declared he. "Since when has your mood so changed? You had no love for him at Dorchester. That I'll swear! Or were you fooling me, you sweet trickster, in that as in all else? Answer me! I am not a patient man!"

"Very few of the virtues seem to have fallen to your share," said Bathia. "But, since you have some right to reproach me, I will answer you. If my love is of sudden growth, it is none the less strong and real. Perhaps the tears of my pity watered it. Perhaps the flame of his self-sacrifice has set my heart on fire. I do not know how or why other women love. But I think that I learnt the way as soon as

I understood what my husband really is; as soon as I let his actions speak for his generous nature; and saw, by his noble care of his wife's honour and welfare, his utter worthiness to be loved. That is all, Lord Maumbury, that I can say about it. Is it enough for you?"

"Enough? By God, yes—it is enough! And yet it is worth so little that we can dismiss it all! Your maiden fancy has been caught by the veriest platitudes. 'Tis plain that your lover——"

"My husband, my lord."

"Oh, call him what you please! I say that he has bought your callow affection with the worn-out stock-in-trade of a third-rate romancist. Pity, self-sacrifice, generosity—why, he trots out all the broken-winded stalking-horses and puts them through their paces! Oh, sweetest angel that you are, cannot you learn wisdom from your past experience? Don't you see that all this pretty show of generosity is part of his plan? Have you forgotten his reason for making you what he calls his wife?"

"'Tis you who forget, or wilfully misunderstand me," cried Bathia in reply. "I said that his actions—his unstudied actions, my lord!—spoke for themselves. Surely only a man of noble nature would have encumbered himself with a helpless woman at a time when a lost moment might imperil his very life! Such and such I judge by; not by his words, for, God forgive me!—I have shown him little encouragement for those."

Maumbury stood silent for a moment, angry, yet admiring; rebuffed, but only the more resolved upon conquest. Her beautiful face and figure, defiant, proud, and a little scornful, whipped his passion to the point of recklessness. The thought that his rival, whom he had caged and chained, still stood between him and his desires, turned his naturally cool brain into a dazzling dangerous thing. After a moment he fell back upon his old weapons, and so by chance came upon his sharpest weapon of all.

"The man's a thief," said he. "Already he is as good as condemned to die. Where will all your pride and love be in a short time? Swinging on a gallows-tree along with six feet or so of dead flesh! Small chance for heroics then, my lovely one!"

Bathia paled, but found the spirit to reply.

"I can love him as well dead as living," she said with sparkling eyes. "But are you so certain that he needs must die?"

Maumbury smiled sourly. Here, at least, the ground was sure beneath his feet.

"So certain," he told her in reply to her spirited challenge, "that I would wager my earldom on the result of the trial. There are witnesses against him. Did he tell you that?"

"No, he did not! But I will tell you another fact. There is a witness, a true witness, on his side. My husband is not a thief. Such an intention was never in his mind."

Maumbury grew alert, but was clever enough to conceal his real interest. As the prosecutor in the case, it would be of value to discover what sort of defence would be put forward on behalf of the prisoner. With devilish cunning, he drew Bathia on.

"He will be hard put to it to prove that," said he. "To help one's self to another man's horse is to bring one's self under the law—or so the law rules."

"I know nothing of the law!" retorted Bathia impatiently. "It seems to be a wicked and cruel invention of the most powerful classes. But surely even so detestable an organization must be fair-minded to continue at all."

"Excellent logic! Well?"

"And it can be proved that in taking the horse, my husband was only obeying certain directions." In her defence of the guiltless theft, she was deaf for the time being to the accusation of her conscience—accepting her own humiliating position as a thing of lesser importance. "He had been asked to fetch the horse from the stable and to lead it to a certain place. He was not aware whose horse it really was, but believed it to be one lent for the occasion. What he did, he did quite openly, and with no wrong thought in his mind. And all this, I say, can be easily proved."

Maumbury's lips curved into a still more sardonic smile.

"Proved?" he repeated. "And by whom, my sweet special pleader, may I ask?"

"By me," said Bathia.

"By you?"

"Yes." She smiled her triumph at him so radiantly that a man less inflamed by his own selfish emotions would have pitied and spared her. "It was I who sent him to the stable that night, who gave him the key of the door, and asked him to bring the horse out. Surely, my lord, if I can make the court believe that, Demas Chaldecott must needs be set free."

"If you could make the court believe it," replied Maumbury with a subtle inflexion of her words. "Perhaps."

"I will!" cried Bathia. "I must!"

"Sweet one, you'll not have the chance. No doubt the sight of so fair a witness might muddle the brains of judge and jury alike. But you'll not have the chance."

"And why not? Who is to prevent me?"

"The law itself . . . Mrs. Chaldecott; the law."

"I don't understand! I don't believe you!"

"'Tis very simple. You admitted a moment ago that you know nothing of the law. Let me tell you, then, that in English law the testimony of a prisoner's wife is reckoned null and void. She cannot give evidence either for or against him; for all legal purposes, in such a case she does not exist."

"Oh, my God!" whispered Bathia with wide eyes. Then—"I don't believe you. No. I don't believe you. This is another lie."

He shrugged a shoulder.

"Ask anyone you please—go to the nearest attorney—he will tell you the same. The relationship you claim with the prisoner puts you out of a court at once. But, oh, my lovely Bathia, I have you between my hands at last! A thousand blessings on your charming innocence! Yes—I have you now."

Very pale and trembling a little, she shrank back. He pressed closer, a wicked triumph in his face, his hands entreating hers, his breath coming in warm waves across her cheek and throat, sickening her. Deeper into the bay of the window she shrank, clenching the curtains with tremulous fingers lest he should make a mock of her despair. The moment was one of mental anguish, of quivering pain, yet down below the market-folk chaffered and dallied, and screamed their wares above the clamour of the crowd. The sounds came up with a maddening persistence that drew her eyes for an instant from her companion's face. Then she heard him speaking again.

"Don't you see, you dear fool, that your pretty obstinacy in the matter of your marriage will be the undoing of this fellow whom you say you love?"

"Then I will not speak of that! They shall not know. I——"

He laughed at her, gently, almost with good-humour.

"And do you think that I would permit that?" he asked. "You have me—my knowledge, to reckon with. Is it likely that I have advised you on a vital point of English law in order to save the life of a man who stands in my way? By heavens, Bathia, no! As surely as you attempt to save him in the manner, so surely do I reveal your relationship."

"Oh, my lord," she moaned, "have pity on me! Have I not been punished enough?"

"Wait. There is something else."

"Oh, have done! What more have you to say?"

"This. Demas Chaldecott's wife cannot save him, but . . . mine could."

Her head swayed back under the shock, her eyes grew glassy, her arms fell limply against her sides. Thinking she was about to faint, Maumbury reached forward, put one arm around her and with the other threw up the window. The next moment he had released her, and was moving quickly back from the open bay.

"Oh, coward, coward!" cried Bathia then, the blood rushing back to her face. She struck her hands together. "Never, never, will I consent so to dishonour one whom I should pretend to save! Let that be your answer—never, never, as long as I draw breath!"

"Your loyalty is glorious. God, that it should be wasted on so mean an object! Think again! I am the only one you need fear. I'll square the parson—though for Chaldecott's sake, he's not likely to peach—I'll square Felix, I'll——"

The door of the room swung inwards. A red-faced elderly man stood on the threshold.

"Damnation!" muttered Maumbury, who had not bargained for so speedy an intrusion by the man whom he had recognized in the street a minute ago.

Bathia flew across the room.

"You are Mr. Willavize!" she cried. "Thank God you have come! I am Demas Chaldecott's wife."

Willavize caught her outstretched hand. He looked grave and stern.

"I remember you," he said. "Demas Chaldecott's wife. . . . And this is—the Earl of Maumbury. May I ask what you are doing here—my lord?"

III

INTERIM

It was hard, so the polite world said, to catch a Peverell at a disadvantage. The present owner of the name acknowledged the parson's accusing stare with a slight bow and came forward leisurely.

"Mr. Willavize," he said, "I hold the best cards now. Would it not be best to arrange matters on a friendly footing?"

"God knows," burst out the other indignantly, "I don't desire your friendship! Please answer my question."

Maumbury glanced at the still trembling Bathia.

"The lady at your side is both my reason and my excuse for being here," said the younger man coolly. "A sufficient one, surely, in either case."

The parson turned to Bathia.

"Has he been insulting you, madam?" he asked.

"He has made vile proposals," she answered. "What they are, I will leave him to repeat."

The parson's face crimsoned anew. He took a step forward.

"You seem to have forgotten a certain conversation which we once had together—my lord," said he.

"Not at all, sir. But, as I told you just now, I have the ace and the king in my hand, and the knave under my heel. It would be only natural for me to possess the queen—and such a queen!—as well."

"You're a damned scoundrel! I'll prove it before I've done!"

"You'll find it a deal easier to prove that Demas Chaldecott is a damned thief," returned Maumbury, unmoved.

Bathia waited eagerly on the parson's reply. She saw his eyes grow harder, and all the flaccid complacency of his natural expression change into a manly severity. Instinctively she moved a little nearer to him.

"I've heard the news," he said. "And from the most authentic source. Consequently, I am well aware of the villainous part which you have played in the affair, my lord."

"I object to your expressions, sir. Moreover, they have no foundation in the truth—which, I understand, has always been of importance to you."

"Upon my soul——" cried the parson.

"Don't lose your temper, sir. 'Tis a cursed bad habit which you and your young friend possess in common. Let's get at the facts if we can. You accuse me of villainy. Why?"

"You've trumped up a charge, and a criminal charge, too, against Demas Chaldecott, for your own unlawful ends. Can you deny that?"

"Oh, sir," cried Bathia, "do you know everything?"

"All that Demas could tell me."

"You have seen him, then?"

"I have come straight from him to look for you, and this is what I find."

"Not by my desire! Oh, believe that, I implore you!"

He drew her hand through his arm. There was confidence, she found, in his grasp.

"I do believe it," he said, but without any sign of sentiment. She turned her appealing eyes upon him.

"And he—how is he?" she faltered.

"About as happy as a man can be who looks to meet his end by violent means in a few months' time," the parson said bluntly.

Bathia withdrew her hand, and all her sudden confidence failed her. Shrinking away, she wondered if he spoke so because he knew of her share in her husband's misfortunes—or because he did not know. Meanwhile, Maumbury was speaking again.

"Come, sir," he said, "you cannot make such an accusation against a Peverell without substantiating it. Your cloth protects you from a heavier penalty, but the satisfaction of an explanation and an apology I have the right to demand, I think."

"I'll not apologize," stormed the parson. "Damn you, Gervis Peverell, I'll see you in hell first! I say you've devised this evil plot for the lad's undoing, because you've—because you've——"

"Well?" asked Maumbury with his sarcastic smile.

"Curse you!" cried the parson in a rage. "Because you've cast eyes of desire on his wife, you unholy scoundrel!"

A curious look crossed Maumbury's face, and the smile lingered awhile.

"I guessed you would say that," he observed. "Did our friend tell you as much?"

"That, and a great deal more. But we'll discuss that matter at another time. For the present there's only one thing for you to do. You must withdraw this infamous charge at once!"

"The infamy surely is with the accused, the man who commits a crime," said the other coolly. "Not with the one who resents the theft of his property."

Bathia interposed.

"Sir," cried she, "my husband is not a thief! He was innocent, completely innocent, of any such intention."

"You need not tell me that, madam," the parson answered shortly. "I've known Demas Chaldecott for over fifteen years. He's as likely to steal a woman's honour as another man's horse."

"Still," Maumbury reminded him, "the fact remains that he did steal the Gift Horse, and was seen doing it. How is that compatible with innocence, sir?"

"Very easily, my lord. He does not deny taking the horse. But it was done in ignorance of the animal's identity. Taken in mistake for another beast, in fact."

Maumbury smiled and shook his head, while Bathia's heart bounded in her breast. Demas, then, had kept her confession secret from his friend.

"That won't do," she heard Demas's enemy saying in his cool incisive tones. "There wasn't another beast in the stable that night."

"Confound you!—he opened the wrong door, then!"

"With a key which obviously he stole for the purpose."

"No! it was given to him."

"Indeed! Did he say by whom?"

"It was I," said Bathia, her face bright with shame.

Parson Willavize stared at her in surprise.

"Ah!" was all he said.

Bathia kept silent. It had been an easy thing to throw her confession as an open defiance at her tormentor. It was harder to repeat it coolly to this short-tempered cleric in the presence of the man who had already pointed out to her its legal worthlessness. While she gathered up her courage, Maumbury took up his argument again, and drew her thoughts with him.

"An unlucky chance, is it not?" said he, "—that the only woman who could satisfactorily clear your young friend of the charge happens also to be—as she has repeatedly assured me—his wife."

"Good God!" The parson swung round on Bathia. "Is this true? Could you clear him?" he asked.

"Very easily; very willingly," she answered. "But I am told—Lord Maumbury says——"

"That a wife's evidence is invalid," said the younger man with a side-glance at the pale-lipped girl.

"And, good God, that's true!" groaned the parson. He walked to a chair, and fell into it heavily. "Good God!" he said again.

Maumbury nodded.

"Just so. As the case now stands," he said, "Chaldecott is convicted—or will be very soon—of Felony Without

Benefit of Clergy—as the Royal Statute which instituted the prerogative of the Gift Horse to us Peverells, has it. And since no one can save him, it really seems as if he must hang. Rather a humiliating ending for an instructor of youth, I think you'll agree."

The parson sprang up, red and furious.

"By God, he sha'n't die!" he cried. "I'll turn the whole world upside down first. I'll——"

"Don't excite yourself, sir. The way would be easy for you, provided you could persuade a certain lady to come forward on his behalf."

"Another lady? Who, where? Tell me how to find her, and I'll discover some means of making the hussy speak!"

Bathia laid an entreating hand on his arm. He shook it off without looking at her, crying out to the other man to explain his meaning more fully.

"This lady's evidence, and a still tongue in your own head, might manage to work out Chaldecott's salvation," Maumbury went on, watching Bathia, who quivered anew beneath his gaze. "Failing which——"

"Who is she?" interrupted the parson fiercely.

"The Countess of Maumbury," said the other man.

"The Countess of —— Good God!—do you mean . . . ? Speak out plainly! Have you . . . ?"

Willavize's amazement and perplexity were of that degree that renders coherent speech, even sequacious thought, impossible. He stared at the other, his red mouth a-gape. Maumbury remained cool and a trifle sarcastic in bearing. In a few brief words he explained the situation, even as he had already explained it to Bathia. His unbridled audacity in so doing, his quiet assumption of his companion's corruptibility, declared with unmistakeable plainness the strength of his position. As he had said, undoubtedly he held the best cards. For a moment even the parson was at a loss for an answer to the suggestion.

"Good Lord, hear him!" he cried at length. "Does my poor lad's life hang indeed upon such a vile proposal as this? I tell you, No—No, sir! And get out of my sight as soon as you can, for, as God's my judge, you've tried my temper long enough, and I may set a mark upon you that you'll not lose in a moment! Go—go—and take your hellish schemes with you! Marry his wife? By God—not while he lives!"

Maumbury bowed and walked towards the door. On the way he paused.

"I am glad that you set so short a limit to my patience," observed he.

Willavize damned him anew.

"I've not done with you yet, you scoundrel!" he roared.

"Threats—or even worse—won't pay, you'll find," retorted the other, looking back for a moment. "As a cleric, of course, you've never fought in a duel. If you had, probably you'd have a better appreciation of the folly of under-estimating your adversary's strength. . . . Madam, good-morning."

As the door closed behind him the parson fell into a chair and wiped his heated face. Bathia, scarcely less agitated, waited for his first words. When they came, they were not encouraging.

"And, by the Lord, he's right!" he said. "That's the very devil of the whole business. God help us!"

"Is it as serious as all that?" questioned Bathia. "Can you find no remedy, sir—no hope?"

Willavize sat up and stared at her awhile.

"Upon my soul," he exclaimed. "I was forgetting you!"

"A very foolish thing to do," said she mournfully; "since I seem to be the unhappy cause of all the misery which has befallen your friend."

"Oh!—I'm not blaming you altogether," said the parson, rising. "And in any case, I've a promise to fulfill. Demas asked me to look after you. Are you going to trust me, ma'am?"

She put her hands in his.

"With all my heart," she replied with a warmth which surprised him. "But did—he—my husband—send any message for me?"

"H'm—no. I can't say that he did."

"Did he seem to—to blame me at all?"

"Blame you? No; why should he?" asked Willavize brusquely. "I always thought the shoe was upon t'other foot. And if I'd had my way you'd never have been wife of his."

"Yet, sir, you married us!"

"Married ye?" The parson rubbed his chin. "Why, yes; so I did, to be sure. More's the pity, say I! Here I am with you on my hands just when I need all my wits and energies for the poor lad himself."

"If I am a drag upon your movements——" began Bathia.

"T'cht, t'cht, ma'am, I never said so. And if you were

Sisyphus' stone itself, I must needs carry you home with me, since I've promised Demas."

"Very well, Mr. Willavize. I'll say no more. I'll accompany you at once." She rang the bell, and turned again to the parson. "My husband was ill when they took him from here," said she. "Is he—is he better now?"

"Recovering, ma'am, recovering," said the parson in his short way, which, had Bathia known him better, would have told her of much mental disturbance and distress.

As it was, his manner threw her love and tenderness back upon herself in much the same way as Demas's reserve had done. She read in it a subdued inimicalness towards herself, and her state of mind was such that humility took the place of resentment at the present injustice. She therefore made no attempt either to exonerate her past actions or to explain the feelings which ruled her now. He, on his side, harassed by many thoughts and responsibilities of which she knew nothing, did not trouble to bring his usual broad worldliness to bear upon his consideration of Demas's wife, and saw in her apparent anxiety no more than common humanity and a feminine shrinking from the horrors of physical suffering.

One thought cut across her more tender reflections continually: "He has not forgiven me!" And the bitterness of the conclusion overshadowed the sweet timid questioning induced by his farewell utterance. When despair itself failed for very weariness, her sick mind turned to a vain conjecturing as to how much harm she had done to herself by that frank and inevitable confession of hers. Had his danger been, in truth, the outcome of an evil chance, as he himself had at first imagined, how far would they have advanced by now towards a better understanding? Would there still have been no message sent? Or would Parson Willavize—himself grown tolerant and genial beneath a communicated ardour—have been employed by the lonely prisoner as a worthy vehicle for lover-like assurances?

The conclusion to which such meditation brought her held a mingled joy and pain. In his steady thought for her welfare, her honour, her comfort, she dared to find some token of a more ardent regard than was implied in a mere cold statement of their legal relationship. Upon such a condition of heart and mind she had rudely thrust her blunt confession of betrayal—and at this point confidence failed, while desire flamed within her. Not even that last speech of his, with the subdued pathos of its hidden meaning, could calm her tormented mind to a belief in his unconditional forgiveness. The heart which once she had not deemed worth the trouble of breaking could surely hold no more love for one who had outraged it so cruelly.

Driven thus backward and forward by the circumstances of her isolated position and self-tormenting state of mind, she once attempted some greater intimacy with the object of her love. But the parson, to whom her request for an interview with Demas in the prison was made, saw in the suggestion only a further disturbance of the young fellow's efforts at resignation and mental calm, and put her off with a vague promise to be fulfilled at some future date.

Bathia then penned a passionate letter, imploring Demas's forgiveness, and praying for some word or token to break his silence. When it was written she forced herself to read it with the eyes of the man for whom it was intended. With the result that her spirit sank beneath a load of humiliation, and her courage failed. Who was she to ask so much of one so deeply wronged? In its place, she wrote a formal little note, expressing a very natural concern for his health and position, the alarming seriousness of which she entreated him to believe had come as a revelation to one already overwhelmed by contrition for her action in the past—an action for which she dared not ask his pardon.

In course of time an answer was returned, written in the wavering characters of sickness, and as formal as her own. Forgiveness was granted, and her assertion fully accepted. Let there be peace between them; the gravity of his situation forbade anything else—on his side, at all events.

Bathia took the luke-warm comfort of this missive to her heart, little guessing how much pain had gone to its writing, or how much jealousy had had to be crushed down before it could be written at all. For Demas in his prison was suffering no less than she, and in as great silence and mental loneliness.

Of his belief in Bathia's love for Felix Peverell he could not bring himself to speak. And the parson, who visited him as often as was permitted, though he watched him with the narrow scrutiny of affection, had no suspicion of the error which was tormenting him with so much added misery. The visits to the prison were small joy to the easy-going pleasure-loving man, forced to face such portentious facts and issues as he had hitherto scrupulously avoided. Between the two, little was said; there seemed so little to say. Neither acknowledged his own hopelessness, yet each read it plainly in his companion's long silences and desultory speech. Once the parson was strongly moved.

"Would to God my life were to live again!" he exclaimed. "Demas, I've not been the guardian to you that I ought to have been. I can see that now."

"As good as another," said Demas in reply. "I don't complain, sir."

"No; not now. That's where you've changed, my boy. Once we never met but you were complaining about something."

Demas answered after a long pause:

"You said once that Time and Experience would knock me into shape. Perhaps they have!"

"I left you too much alone," sighed the parson. "And you had nobody but me."

Meanwhile, Maumbury was pushing on the affair with a shameless lack of decency. By dint of his wide-reaching influence he had succeeded in getting the case included in the forthcoming Assizes. In vain the parson remonstrated with the authorities and appealed in his blustering way to Maumbury himself. The legal functionaries hid their well-oiled palms, and turned a deaf ear to the accusation of brutality in dragging a man from a sick bed to stand his trial on the capital charge. And with Maumbury the distracted Willavize met with no further success.

"You're doing this to hamper the defence!" he said stormily. "And to deny the poor lad the benefit of your brother's evidence."

"Felix's evidence isn't necessary," returned Maumbury. "It wouldn't affect the case one way or the other. He couldn't say any more than the servants who were with him can."

"I don't know about that!" persisted the other. "I don't believe he'd let my poor Demas go to the gallows without a word in his behalf. You're rushing the trial in a damnable manner, I say, in order to prevent us from finding witnesses to match yours!"

"A man of your judgment ought to know that a year's looking wouldn't produce any outside witness able to save Chaldecott—who, I must remind you, has admitted the technical offence to yourself, as you'll no doubt have the pleasure of relating to the court——"

The enraged parson shook his fist in the speaker's face, and cursed him from the bottom of his soul. To get Willavize subpœnaed for the prosecution had been one of Maumbury's early moves.

"——and who has also impressed the public mind with a belief in his guilt by his ill-advised flight."

"No one understands better than you why that was done!"

"Well, if you don't want that exquisite lady's name flung about in court, or her virtue called in question—and I'm sure I don't!—you'll keep your mouth shut on that aspect of the case. I rather fancy Chaldecott himself would prefer it."

The parson swore under his breath. The subtle truth that underlay all this man's apparently fallacious arguments, and was the mainstay of his position, met and confounded Demas's friend at every turn.

"When you made your infamous proposition to his wife," he said, "did you mean to keep your word?"

"There's only one case I ever heard of," answered Maumbury, "where a Peverell broke it."

The parson flushed, but kept to the point in hand.

"Knowing," he asked, "all that such an act on your part would inevitably imply on mine?"

A look of concentrated recklessness fixed itself upon Maumbury's handsome features.

"Knowing even that," he said.

There was a moment's pause. Then——

"You must desire this woman exceedingly," said the parson.

"More than anything else in heaven or earth! Let me once win her, with all record of this bogus marriage destroyed—and Chaldecott shall be a free man. Go and persuade her to come to my arms if you can!"

Willavize's answer came harsh and rapid.

"By God, I will not!" he cried. "Not even to spare Demas Chaldecott the agony of the death to which you are sending him! I refuse to save his body at a cost which he himself would rank too high. He shall go to his Maker with his honour as untarnished as his own acts have kept it all these four-and-twenty years!"

And as he marched from the room, the red-faced elderly man, with his easeful conscience-smothering ways, had attained to a dignity of mind and soul which the facile young man of the world had never known.

IV

IN THE MATTER OF A CONSCIENCE

It was not to be supposed that in these days of distraction and distress Parson Willavize would have much time for his own amorous affairs. Julia Trickett was therefore left a great deal to herself. Under pressure of the impending disaster, the whole household at the Tudor House groaned in spirit, and Julia's own private worry gathered weight from the general depression. Mrs. Virgin, with whom Demas had never been a favourite, and whose acerbity had been aroused by the parson's matrimonial schemes, added unconsciously to the girl's woes by dilating at great length upon the enormous iniquity of laying hands upon another person's property.

"But," protested the tearful Julia, arguing for herself as well as for Demas, "Mr. Chaldecott didn't mean to steal the horse."

"That makes no manner o' difference," affirmed the housekeeper. "He laid unlawful hands upon what didn't belong to him, and the Almighty'll judge him accordin'. For our fingers weren't a-given to us humble mortals to touch other folks' goods wi', and mind you remember that, my girl."

Which admonition set Julia trembling with fear lest the matter of the clock should become known, and her own feet turned towards the dark pathway in which her old playmate had been forced to tread.

At first Bathia, absorbed in her more subtle griefs, took little notice of the girl. The parson had placed Julia at her disposal, to fulfill the offices of maid and companion. Thus they were thrown much together, but with no show of confidence on either side. At times Bathia, raising mournful eyes, would find Julia gazing at her with an expression hardly less woeful than her own. With the self-concentration of remorseful grief, she took the subdued gravity of the girl's demeanour for sympathy with herself, and accepted it for awhile in silence. But at length she was moved to speak of it.

"You don't seem very happy, child," she said as they sat together on the little lookout that, raised above the garden, gave a wide view over the waters that washed its outer wall at full tide. "Are you sorry for me?—for Mr. Chaldecott?"

"Yes, ma'am. I'm sorry for both of ye. And I hope, with all my heart, as he'll get off. It must be cruel hard for 'ee, my lady."

Bathia looked more closely at the girl. Intuition cried aloud. "Something is hurting you also, Julia," she said. "You are not in love, my dear, are you?"

"I don't know, ma'am. I'm—I'm to marry Parson Willavize, he says."

Bathia looked her surprise.

"Oh, 'tis quite true!" cried Julia. "He says I must."

"But surely it is a matter for you as well," protested the elder girl. "Do you love him, my dear?"

"He've been very good to me."

"That's not enough. This, then, is what has been worrying you, Julia. I'll speak to Mr. Willavize as soon as he comes back again."

"Oh, ma'am, please don't!"

"Why not, if——?"

"How did you know I were worrying, ma'am?"

"How? Because I'm a woman, too," answered Bathia sadly. "A suffering woman, Julia. And I should like to help you if I can."

Julia shook her head, and gazed into space. The yellow sunshine of early spring brightened the budding garden, and set the waters beyond sparkling in the clear air. Steel-grey they ran up into a narrowing channel that pierced the flat Hampshire coast westward, and stretched, with the even ripple of an inland lake, to the opposite wooded shores. The sound of the miniature waves lapping the strip of pebbly foreshore beneath the garden was the only disturbance in the silent peace of the harboured spot. The wind came from the east, and, blowing along the land, ruffled Bathia's bright curls, and flicked to a deeper colour Julia's winsome face that was made for laughter and kisses. But the eyes of the one were turned westwards towards the place where Demas lay, and the rosy lips of the other had a mournful curve.

"Do you mean that you want to marry Mr. Willavize?" asked Bathia presently.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Then you do love him!"

No answer came. To her perplexity, Bathia saw the tears well up in Julia's eyes.

"What is it?" she asked, bending over the drooping head.

Julia sobbed outright. Bathia took her hand. Out of her own miserable experience words came in unrestrained vehemence.

"Oh, my dear, my dear," cried she, "don't be so foolish! Don't marry a man you don't love for the sake of a finer position, a freer life, than you have now! Don't, if you value your happiness, throw away the chance of being the wife of a poor man whom you love with all your heart. Think of the joy of keeping his home bright and clean, of making it a pleasant place for him after his work is done—

of showing him in such small simple ways that all the day you have been thinking of him, and getting things ready for his return. Oh, my dear, surely there can be no greater happiness than to run to meet him when he comes in, tired out perhaps, but with his eyes lit up with his great love for you, and his arms so ready to take you to his heart and hold you there ! "

Julia ceased her sobs to listen.

" Why, ma'am," she cried, " you do speak as if 'twas terrible real to 'ee. But, 'tisn't that at all ! "

" What can it be ? " questioned Bathia, her own eyes brimming now, but not with sympathy for Julia.

The other girl gave a great gasp, and suddenly found the courage to speak.

" I've been a bad naughty maid," she affirmed. " And I've never told the parson about it, an' I've got to marry him so as when I do tell him he'll forgive me easy. For gentlemen aren't never angry with their wives, are they, ma'am ? But I—I ha'n't told him yet, and every night I'm afraid I may die afore morning light; die—and go to—— "

" Tell me ! " said Bathia. " What have you done ? Nothing very bad, I am sure."

And when, in a tear-choked voice, Julia had faltered out the story of her innocent prank with Lord Maumbury's clock, Bathia strangled a little bitter laugh. Beside this simple girl's peccadillo, her own unconfessed guilt looked unforgiveable indeed. It came home to her with new force that she had not yet acknowledged her criminal share in Demas's suffering and peril. That he had maintained a loyal silence even to his best friend was further proof of his generosity, but in no way freed her from the obligation of confession.

Now, as she sat there by the side of this mild sinner and thought of her own responsibility, it seemed to her that it might be well to pave the way for herself by undertaking to make Julia's peace with the parson. To the girl's trivial misdemeanour she attached no importance, nor did she expect her host to do so either, but her own confession, she felt assured, would come easier so. To Julia she said :

" It is not a very wrong thing that you have done, but since it troubles you, I will tell Mr. Willavize about it, if you would like me to do so for you." And she waited for the other girl's reply with an eagerness out of proportion to the *primâ facie* aspect of the proposal. Julia answered with alacrity.

"Oh, ma'am, if you would be so kind!"

"It won't be any trouble. And I should like to help you. I seem never to have helped anyone in all my life!"

And, with this new resolve fixed firmly in her mind, Bathia waited restlessly for the parson's coming.

He arrived the next evening, an anxious-eyed care-worn man, newly back from Dorchester, whither, on the morrow, he must return, taking her with him. For the trial of Demas Chaldecott for the theft of the Maumbury Gift Horse was to be held on the subsequent day.

Whether it was that his eyes were newly opened to her wretchedness, and his mind softened to all suffering by the thought of the impending tragedy, or because Bathia was letting her misery break down some of her customary reserve, and was therefore revealing herself in a more tender and human light, it was a fact—strange enough to the girl—that Parson Willavize greeted her this evening more warmly than usual.

"You have seen him?" she faltered as their hands fell apart.

"Yes; for the last time before the trial."

Her eyes questioned him mutely.

"He is bearing up well," he told her. "But I don't think he expects any mercy or justice in this world, God help him!"

"You speak," said Bathia, "as if you had no hope either. Tell me—is there no chance at all? You have told me so little all this time of what is being done. Surely I have a right to know everything, for at least I am his wife."

"That's true," said the parson, and was silent for a moment. They were in the large oak-panelled room, and the flames in the big fireplace threw wavering gleams on the shining walls here and there, but left most of the room in shadow. The minstrels' gallery was a place of utter darkness, and the beams beneath were barely distinguishable in the gloom. A couple of candles upon the high mantelshelf lent but small radiance to the end of the room where the parson sat before the blaze, and Bathia leant against the chimney carving, and saw terrible things in the deep heart of the fire.

"There's little to tell," said Willavize presently. "The trial has been shamefully pressed forward, and there's no denying that the defence, unsupported, as it must needs be, by any witness, is a poor one. The counsel is a clever man, but he can't create legal belief in facts without evidence, and Maumbury's name is certain to influence the jury."

All the details of a modern trial were outside both Bathia's reading and practical experience, and she gathered more from her companion's manner than from his words.

"They have one powerful witness," the parson went on. "But we haven't been able to discover one. It gives the prosecution an enormous pull over us."

"Cannot he—my husband—give you any suggestion? Is he making no effort to save himself?"

A shade crossed the parson's face. He leant forward with his clasped hands hanging between his knees, and he also was gazing into the fire as though the scroll of Demas's fate might be found therein.

"At times," he answered, his tones mellowed to a slow confidence, "—at times it has almost seemed to me that he does not wish to."

"Not wish to—to save himself?"

"Perhaps I am wronging him. Life is a good gift, and he was lusty with warm wholesome blood before this happened. But sometimes, as I say, I have fancied that he . . . . looks beyond."

"No, no!" cried Bathia, and shuddered in the heat of the blazing logs. "Can nothing be done?" she urged again.

The poignant quality of her appeal drew Willavize's eyes upward. The thought came to him that, this crisis happily over, the hands which he had joined in Parley Church, and which had fallen apart so soon, might yet be bound together in the clasp of a truer understanding.

"Demas cannot help himself," he said bluntly. "As we know, he is technically guilty. That fact precludes the possibility of his being able to point us to one legitimate witness or one saving factor. He took the horse; how can he prove, then, that he did not? And anything less than absolute proof will not bring about his acquittal."

"You state the facts very plainly, sir," said Bathia.

"I do. There's little use in encouraging either you or myself with false hopes. I keep such for my poor Demas himself. Would to God my lord were alive still!"

"The last Lord Maumbury? Would he have been able to save—Demas?"

"I didn't say so. I was only thinking that he could have used his influence on that devil Gervis. It was a stroke of bad luck that he must die just when most of all he was needed alive."

"He was your friend, I think, sir?"

"Yes; and Demas's. He died in my arms. . . . Perhaps, after all it was as well . . . but I don't know."

In the silence that followed, Bathia picked up the connection. Julia Trickett's story. She remembered what for the time she had forgotten. Her promise to Julia, and her own resolve. Lest this last should weaken, she sprang into the matter at once.

"He died on the day when you took Julia Trickett down to Wyke Hall, didn't he?" she began.

"In the evening of that day—towards nightfall."

"And you left her alone for a little while."

"Yes. Has she told you about it, poor maid? His lordship was going to do great things for her, I hoped."

"And did not! Therefore you are going to marry her. I think you are wrong in that, Mr. Willavize."

The parson rubbed his chin.

"I've sometimes thought so myself, madam. You women play the devil in any man's affairs."

Bathia winced, and fortified her quailing spirit by a continuance of Julia's trivial little story.

"While you left her alone, a small incident occurred which has been troubling her mind ever since. It is really very unimportant, but her tender conscience has magnified it into a grievous sin, and now she is afraid to tell you at all. It is making the girl very unhappy, Mr. Willavize, and I promised to tell you myself, and ask you to forgive her."

"Poor Julia! poor maid! That's been the trouble, then! Afraid of me, is she? Poor child! What has she done?"

Bathia's wan mouth curved into the semblance of a smile.

"She was frightened of the grand room, and the servants," she explained, "and wanted to get away soon. So she put the clock on the mantelshelf forward half-an-hour, thinking that when you returned you would mistake the time and hurry off to catch the coach a half-hour before you would naturally do so."

The parson smiled indulgently, and nodded at the fire.

"Just so . . . poor little Julia. Her ruse didn't serve her much. . . . For my lord was taken ill; stricken down and carried off to his death-bed, in fact. And Julia was scared out of her wits, I remember. . . . And I never looked at the clock until—— Good God! madam, what is this you're telling me?"

"Why, sir, what is the matter?"

Willavize was on his feet. Never within the space of a few moments had she seen a man so transformed. The lethargy which had held him drooping in his chair had been shaken off from a figure as erect and vibrant as her own. From his face the lines had been smoothed out, the weariness was gone from his eyes. His cheeks glowed full and red, his mouth seemed to utter great things, although some emotion—rather, it seemed, of the mind than of the heart—prevented articulation. With a swift movement, he caught hold of Bathia's wrist, and held it in a pressure that left it aching, even as his deep tones rang in her head long after the moment had passed.

"Tell me again!" he commanded. "And God bless ye, madam, for the tale!"

Bathia pulled herself free, and ran to the door, thrilling with a strange excitement for which she knew no reason at all.

"Let the girl speak for herself!" she cried. "Julia! Julia!"

V

TANDEM JUSTITIA

"MY lord, I desire to recall the witness Anthony Oram."

The words were spoken by the defending counsel towards the end of Demas Chaldecott's trial.

The court was full. Some interest had been aroused in the case because of the noble name which figured in the prosecution. The prisoner had dropped into a place of secondary importance, though, without any effort on his part, he succeeded in attracting a little attention during the progress of the trial. This was due more to his personal attributes than to any striking demeanour which he displayed in the dock.

He was pale with the pallor of a convalescent, but composed, and possessed of a youthful dignity which lent stability to his natural grace even in his present ignominious position. His noticeable appearance made him a focus for the eyes of the spectators whenever they roamed from the handsome face of the chief witness against him, or were removed from the calmly confident features of the man who was most nearly concerned in seeing justice done. The prisoner, it was observed, looked at no one in particular, save once. This was shortly after his entrance into the court, when his eyes wandered round the galleries and lingered for a few moments in a certain obscure corner. But those curious enough to follow his gaze saw only the figure of a woman in a dun-coloured cloak, whose face was half-hidden by a deep bonnet. Those at a distance noticed that she leant forward and followed the trial with the closest attention. Those at her side judged that she was of no marked quality, for the cloak was stained and torn, and the small wadded tippet which she had removed from her shoulders, weather-soiled and of poor cut and style.

One look. No more. As the minutes shaped themselves into a dreary stretch of unrecognized time, Bathia was conscious of a growing chill at her heart. It was all so new to her, both as a spectacle, and as a sequence of events bearing with tragic force upon the fate of the man she loved, that she was in some danger of growing confused at the first. There was no friend at her side. She had been separated from the parson and Julia as soon as they had reached the court. Besides these two, there were but a couple more faces which, on looking down into the well of the court, she recognized. Despite the physical attractiveness of both, each now repelled her like an evil thing. She saw them whispering together—Lord Maumbury and Diana Woodland. The unconcealed rancour of the man's attack, she thought she could understand. The woman's attitude puzzled her. Diana had sent no message of regret, had expressed no distress at the action which, as Bathia supposed, she had been forced to take against her. Yet once this woman had called herself her friend.

The entrance of Demas found Bathia still wondering, but from the moment of his long silent gaze upon her, all thoughts save of him and his peril left her mind.

Of the opening speeches, interlarded as they were with much legal verbosity, she could make but little. The calling of the witnesses drew her closest attention. Maumbury was the first one to step into the box.

The court had heard what was a familiar story to many of those assembled—an account of the hereditary gift from the Crown of a horse from the Royal stables. This prerogative of the Earls of Maumbury was held in remembrance of the saving of King Charles at the Battle of Worcester by one of their ancestors, and its institution was contemporaneous with the creation of the title at the Restoration.

In the summer of the preceding year, Maumbury, in examination, stated, the existing Gift Horse had died, and another presented to his uncle, according to custom. But by that time, the late Lord Maumbury had ceased to take much interest in current affairs, and the horse had been conveyed by his orders to the stables of a hunting-lodge on his estate at Parley. Here the witness had seen the animal in the November of the last year. Bathia remembered the occasion very well, for it was during this visit of his that he had first seen herself, and been struck by her unusual horsemanship. His cool tones continued, and she thrust back her memories in order to lose no word.

The animal had developed some slight malady, and in consequence had been detained at Parley beyond his lordship's original intention. But at length he had sent instructions to his younger nephew to bring the horse down to Wyke Hall. Felix Peverell then journeyed to Parley. At this point Bathia again felt the recital touch herself, and once more trembled at the remembrance. She heard with relief Maumbury's equivocal explanation of the prolonged delay. In his brother's opinion, the horse was not yet fit for the road, and its removal was postponed. He then approached the night of the alleged theft. At the end of the year, his lordship had again requested his nephew Felix to superintend the bringing of the Gift Horse to Wyke Regis, and his instructions were obeyed on the eleventh of January in the present year. The journey was broken at Poole, and the horse stabled at *The Antelope*. He himself did not see either his brother or the animal until after its recovery early the next day.

A short cross-examination by the opposing counsel followed. As Bathia gathered, this gentleman desired a little further information respecting the Royal gift.

"It is a gift in perpetuity, I understand?" he asked.

Maumbury replied that it was.

"And of a strictly hereditary nature?"

"Absolutely. The theft, or even the attempted theft of it, ranks as Felony Without Benefit of Clergy."

"I desire to see the Royal Charter bestowing the gift," said the judge. And it was accordingly produced and handed up to the bench.

Other witnesses followed, the purport of their evidence being to prove the time of the arrival of Felix's party with the horse, the manner of its bestowal, and the hour when its disappearance was discovered. General interest flagged perceptibly during these narrations, but soon afterwards a wave of emotional curiosity swept across the crowded court, as Diana Woodland's name was called.

That there was any thought behind the spoken words of her evidence no one who listened to them had any reason to suspect. Even Demas himself had not gone beyond the obvious identification of the runagate wife with the beautiful Widow Woodland. And of the details of his visit to the stable-yard he had spoken to no one. To attempt a recrimination on the chief witness against himself by the suggestion of a scandal was a course which did not appeal to his clean mind, and as he was, like the rest of the listeners—save Maumbury—unaware of any discrepancy between her previous statement at her husband's inquest and that now made to the court, there was nothing to arouse any darker suspicion regarding her.

Diana identified the prisoner as the stranger whom she had seen in the yard of *The Antelope*, between the hours of half-past eight and nine o'clock on the night of the theft. She had attached no evil purpose either to his presence or the fact that he was unlocking the stable-door, although it afterwards seemed to her that his actions were performed in an unusually furtive manner. There were no other men in the yard at the time. Her object in going to the inn had been to leave instructions relating to her own horses, and as, owing to a dance being in progress, she had been unable to see the landlord, she had wished to leave a message with the ostlers. The desperate look of the prisoner, as seen by the lanthorn which he carried, had prevented her addressing him. And as there seemed no chance of getting her errand performed that night, she had returned home shortly after her arrival, reaching her house at a few minutes after nine.

To the surprise of the court there was no cross-examination of this witness.

Then was called the constable Anthony Oram. He spoke to having met the prisoner the same night outside the inn, and having, at his request, told him the time, it then being a quarter to nine. On parting from him, the prisoner had entered the yard alone.

Next it was proved that two tickets for the aforementioned dance had been purchased on the previous day in the names of Mr. and Mrs. Chaldecott. Bathia flamed afresh with indignation; and even Demas was startled into some display of astonishment, but the man who could have disproved the implication was not in the court, and the woman who understood was not going to tell. And so the effect left upon the minds of the jury was that the crime had been planned with extreme artfulness and caution.

The story of the theft passed on to the account of the discovery of the horse's disappearance. At three minutes after nine o'clock, so Felix Peverell's head-groom related, his master had burst in upon him in a rare taken an' swearen fit to crack his jaws. At first the groom had thought that such anger was at his unpunctuality in setting the guard over the animal, but soon learnt the fact that the horse had been stolen. Pursuit was the order, and after hard riding they had come up with the thieves, three in number, but not including the prisoner. After some hard blows, the witness continued, the Gift Horse had been recaptured and conveyed back to *The Antelope*. On the way thither, they had discovered the prisoner lying wounded in the road, and under their master's orders had carried him back to the town.

The afternoon's proceedings opened with the appearance of Parson Willavize in the box. This was the first time since their separating that Bathia had been able to take a full look at her recent companion. She found him cool, collected, unemotional, and her heart cried out against such apparent lack of sensibility. It seemed that he had little to tell. He had first heard of the theft from the Earl of Maumbury at Wyke Hall on the day following the late earl's decease, but no idea of connecting the crime with the prisoner had then occurred to him.

"And when," asked the counsel, "did such an idea present itself to you?"

"When I received a letter from the prisoner."

"What did that letter tell you?"

"That he had been arrested on a charge of horse-stealing."

"Was it written from Dorchester Gaol?"

"It was."

"Did you see the prisoner there?"

"Yes."

"Frequently?"

"Several times."

"Did he," asked the counsel, leaning forward with index finger upraised, "did he at any time make a certain statement to you?"

"Many statements on different occasions," replied the parson with no show of concern.

"One bearing upon his present situation, I mean?"

"Yes; he did."

"Will you repeat it."

Bathia, still untutored in the ways of a criminal court, hung over her gallery and felt her heart pounding unbearably against the ledge. To what were these questions leading up?—and how did this thin-faced black-gowned man guess at the confidences of her poor Demas in his prison cell? She heard the parson's reply, and sat back aghast, "He told me that technically he had committed the offence, but that he was morally innocent."

The jury buzzed, but whether with disapproval of so candid an admission on the part of one arraigned on the capital charge, or with relief at the second half of the assertion, was a matter of momentary conjecture. Maumbury apparently interpreted the excitement according to his wishes, for he was smiling.

"Did he entertain any hope of being able to establish such innocence?"

"No; he had no such hope."

"A very remarkable statement, then, on the face of it," commented the counsel.

"The court," observed his lordship from the bench, "does not sit to hear cases of abstract morality."

"I am well aware that it prefers facts, my lord," said Willavize.

Demas was looking at him in a kind of pained surprise. It was the only piece of evidence which had so far shaken him out of his unnatural calm. Diana Woodland and Maumbury exchanged glances.

Cross-examined, the parson said that the prisoner had lived under his guardianship for the past fifteen years, and was, in his opinion, utterly incapable of committing *in malice prepense* so mean a crime as the one now charged against him.

Bathia leant back faint and dizzy with disappointment. Was that the best which his only friend could do for him? Was this all that the parson's cheerful optimism had built itself upon? She dared another glance towards the dock. Demas was paler now, and his eyes had a tired strained look. Her whole body throbbed with the agony of her powerless love, and she paid little heed to the next three witnesses, who consisted of the post-boy who had secured the blood-money, and the constables who had made the arrest.

She was recalled to the immediate scene by hearing the words—

"That, my lord, concludes the case for the Prosecution."

And for the Defence—What?

She brought her distressed face once more into the arena of the court. The opposing counsel was already upon his feet, when the judge put a question.

"Do you propose, Mr. Fawcett, to conclude your case to-day? I must remind you that the Court opens at Exeter to-morrow at ten o'clock."

"I am aware of that, my lord. May I make a request of a two hours' extension of this session? If your lordship will make the order, I have no hesitation in saying that these proceedings can be terminated before the rising of the court."

The order was accordingly made, and the trial, to the palpitating Bathia's relief, then proceeded.

"I propose, my lord," said the counsel Fawcett, "to call only two witnesses for the Defence. But first I wish to put a few questions to some of those already examined."

The judge signified his assent, and flagging interest revived in the court.

"My lord," cried the speaker, "I desire to recall the witness Anthony Oram."

The old constable re-entered the box.

"You have sworn to the prisoner's identity," began the lawyer. "Was there any possibility of your being mistaken?"

"No; there warn't."

"Why not?"

"'Cos the young chap did speäk to I near-by a tarch-flare, which made it so light as day, through a-fallen athirt his feäce."

"Now about the time. You have stated that the prisoner addressed you at a quarter to nine by your watch. Can you swear to its correctness?"

"Yes, I can! my timepiece b'en't the sart to goo crookedly. Never a minute out in's life."

"Remember you're on oath! Did you look at any of the town clocks that evening?"

"Yes; the girt woone at the Town Hall, an' he were the same as my watch to a tick."

"And when the prisoner asked you the time, you looked at your watch and told him it was a quarter to nine?"

"I did, sir."

"And he immediately entered the inn yard?"

"Yes, he did."

"That will do. Stand down. . . . Recall the Reverend Evurtius Willavize."

Maumbury watched the parson step back into the witness-box with a faint show of curiosity. The parson himself seemed to feel none. His red face was glistening with moisture, for the courthouse had become hot and close with assorted humanity, and he wiped his forehead with a coloured handkerchief as he took his place. For the moment the combined brightness of his visage and the handkerchief vied with the brilliance of the robes on the bench.

"You have already sworn to your long acquaintance with the prisoner," said the counsel. "I understand that he first came under your guardianship as a boy of nine years. Were the circumstances which induced you to adopt him in any way unusual?"

"To a certain extent, they were."

"Had you any private knowledge concerning him which was not shared by the world at large?"

"I had."

"Was the prisoner a sharer in this knowledge?"

"He was not."

"Was any one, beside yourself?"

"One man only. The late Lord Maumbury."

The judge leant forward. His prejudicial upholding of the prestige of the aristocracy was well-known. He now made it evident that this careless linking of one of the proudest titles in the county with an alleged horse-thief discomposed him exceedingly.

"Mr. Fawcett, have these remarkable questions any bearing upon the case? Otherwise, you are wasting the time of the court."

"I entreat your lordship's patience," returned the counsel; "I have only a few more questions to put to the witness." And he turned to Willavize again. The whole court was listening attentively now, much stimulated by the objections from the bench.

"Did you," continued the counsel, "before your adoption of the prisoner as a boy, know him to be the only son of the late Lord Maumbury?"

"I knew it before the adoption was decided upon," said Willavize steadily. But he kept his eyes away from the impassioned gaze which he knew well enough was now directed upon him from the dock. Into the momentary hush following his words came the sound of faint cynical laughter.

"Silence in court!"

"Did you believe him to have been born in or out of wedlock?"

"I knew him to have been born in wedlock."

"You say you knew it. How?"

"Because I married his father to his mother, and baptized their offspring two years later."

The court let out its breath with a gasp, and settled anew.

"Now, sir, you are making serious statements for a man on oath. Do you assert that the prisoner in the dock is, *ipso facto*, the present Earl of Maumbury?"

"I do assert it."

"Have you evidence to support such a claim?"

"Given time and the necessary funds, it could easily be established."

"Have investigations been commenced?"

"They have. By my direction."

Again the judge intervened. His restlessness during the last few minutes would have been noticeable had anyone removed his eyes from the three principal figures of prisoner, counsel, and witness in the centre of the court.

"All this is remarkably interesting," observed his lordship uneasily, "but more fitted for the supper-table of a club-room than for a solemn Assize Court. Mr. Fawcett, I must again admonish you to keep to the case under consideration. However painful this unexpected development"—his lordship appeared to find it extremely painful—"the question is one of prisoner's guilt or otherwise in respect to the crime with which he stands charged. I cannot permit the jury's minds to be unsettled by these irrelevant disclosures."

The counsel bowed, but preserved his composure.

"My lord," said he, "I am about to prove that these disclosures are of the highest importance."

The judge looked still more uneasy. He twitched his robes impatiently.

"Then pray proceed!" said he. And the questioning was resumed.

"Is the gentleman who at present holds the title and estates of the Earl of Maumbury aware of this rival claimant?"

"Yes."

"How long has he been aware of the fact?"

"Since the day after the decease of his uncle, the late Earl."

"Who informed him?"

"Myself."

For a moment the court had eyes for no one but Gervis Peverell.

"Were you present at the late Earl's death?"

"Yes."

"When did it take place?"

"On the night of the eleventh of January in the present year."

"At what hour?"

"It was generally believed to have occurred at nine o'clock. But it has since been ascertained that the hour was only half-past eight."

"That's a wide discrepancy. How did such a mistake arise?"

"Immediately after leaving the death-bed of the Earl, I consulted a clock in one of the apartments downstairs, and by that result the hour of the death was decided. The doctor followed me in, saw what I was doing, and asked the time. I told him it was then five minutes past nine. But I have subsequently learnt that the clock had been set forward half-an-hour by a young girl who had accompanied me to Wyke Hall."

"Are the doctor and the girl in court?"

"They are."

"My lord," cried the counsel, "I will now examine these two witnesses!"

But the opposing counsel sprang up, and forthwith hurled a fiery question at Willavize. One, in truth, for which he had been waiting.

"You say you have known this extraordinary fact for a matter of twenty-four years?" he was asked. "Why did you not lodge an information concerning the prisoner's parentage until to-day?"

"During the late Earl's lifetime," replied Willavize, looking not half so disturbed as the judge himself, "the secret was one which I was bound to keep. It involved the honour, not only of a personal friend, but—of a very noble family, sir. I had no desire to arouse a scandal in high places."

The judge made a hasty movement.

"The court is not concerned with . . . . . unnecessary details, Mr. Mowlem," he observed with extreme acerbity. "Let the next witnesses be called."

And Parson Willavize retired chuckling to himself, having drawn his lordship as successfully as he could have desired.

The physician who had attended the death-bed of the late Lord Maumbury was then placed in the box. He substantiated Willavize's evidence as to the time of death being reported as nine o'clock, and spoke to the stopping, by his orders, of the loudly striking clocks about the place, during the patient's last hours. As he descended from the box, Julia Trickett was called.

Timid, half in tears as she was, her pretty face paled by extreme nervousness, she told her story clearly and ingenuously, under the careful handling of the defending counsel. Nor could the cross-examination for the Prosecution shake her honesty from the simple facts which she had to tell. As she retired, Fawcett sprang to his feet.

“ My lord,” he cried, “ I pray you to adjourn the case! As it stands at present, it cannot, in law, proceed. We have had the combined evidence of Mrs. Diana Woodland and the constable Oram to show that the alleged theft was committed between the hours of a quarter to nine and nine o’clock—certainly not before a quarter to nine. I press that point, because it is important. For, granting for a moment the statement made by Mr. Willavize on oath—himself a cleric of the Established Church—and taking that statement in conjunction with the evidence of Julia Trickett, we come, my lord, to this amazing fact—namely, that, at the time of the alleged theft the prisoner was himself the Earl of Maumbury. Which brings us, my lord, to another fact, equally dramatic in its effect. The Gift Horse being the hereditary property of the Earls of Maumbury, the prisoner, in laying hands upon the animal, was merely taking possession of his own property! An act which, I need not remind your lordship, cannot, in any circumstances, be held to constitute a theft. May I suggest, therefore, my lord, that the case be adjourned until such time as the claim of the prisoner to the Earldom and estates of Maumbury be substantiated and proven? ”

His lordship, who seemed disappointed at such unusual termination to a trial for Felony, and greatly scandalized by the entire proceedings, grudgingly gave the order, proposing to hear the case again at the next Assize—and satisfied his conscience by refusing bail.

The court emptied slowly to the tune of incredulity, interest, and amazement.

Gervis Peverell heard footsteps racing after him down one of the passages, and turning found Diana Woodland at his side. She raised her beautiful agitated face to his.

“ Gervis! Is this strange story true? ”

“ True! The witnesses were suborned! ”

“ Were they? ”

“ Of course! ” he made answer savagely.

“ Are you sure? ”

He looked at her uneasily.

“ What do you mean? ” he said.

“ Did you really—know? ” she asked with subtle malice.

“ I! You ask me that, Diana? ” He tore at the gloves which he was carrying with savage restless fingers. Diana smiled up at him. Whatever liking she had once had for him had been killed long ago by his betrayal of her trust and her own jealousy. But the desire to wound, which had ever been part of her liking, remained.

"You did know!" she accused mockingly. "You did know—Mr. Peverell!"

He flushed darkly, and into the momentary pause in the game came the sound of snapping threads and rending leather. He recovered himself quickly.

"Would you marry me now, Diana," he said, "if I asked you?"

"Do you ask me, Gervis?"

He bowed slightly.

"I do not—Mrs. Woodland," said he. "But have you considered that, if this story is proved, Bathia Chaldecott will be—the Countess of Maumbury?"

Diana quivered back against the wall. A vindictive look narrowed her fine eyes.

"I hadn't thought of that!" she said, watching him. "She!—the Chaldecott woman—the Countess of Maumbury!—while I——!"

With a light cynical laugh, Peverell swung round, and left her leaning there.

VI

THE PARSON'S WORD

It was during the ensuing weeks, and while he yet lay in Dorchester Gaol, that Demas heard the story which had been so long concealed.

It was told to him by Parson Willavize; told shamefacedly, for it held but little credit for the narrator, yet, because the parson was at heart an honest man, it was told truthfully as well.

"The marvel to me is that you never suspected it. To be sure, you didn't see much of my lord. If you had, you couldn't have remained for long in ignorance—or others either. You had points in common; the same graceful habit—though you didn't favour him in features—the same tricks of gesture, even the same tones of voice at times. But, for all that lack of intercourse, I used to wonder that you never recognized your own quality. You were oddly impercipient, Demas. You railed at circumstances and thought yourself a Radical. I encouraged the belief, and laughed in my sleeve. Why, every drop of your blood, every proclivity and limitation, proclaimed you a patrician of the first rank.

You couldn't grow a cabbage, or cook a decent meal, or keep a house in order—or do any of the hundred and one things which you'd have done naturally had you had the double line of agriculturists and cottagers that you believed you had, behind you. Even in your meanest clothes—and your best were seldom quite fine enough for you, you remember —you persisted in looking like—well, the young Viscount that you were! 'Good God,' says my lord, when I first allowed him to clap eyes on you, 'Good God, you never prepared me for this!' And—'I'd give something if only you could be called Peverell,' says he. And you take the compliments with the air of a youthful prince, and never read the feeling behind the words!

"Of course, you want to know the beginning of it all. Well—my lord and I were at college together, and a devilish wild pair of young blades we were. Never a prank too mad or dangerous for Everard and me to get up to. Debts? He had fifteen hundred owing before his first term was out, and was adding to 'em every day. Quick of temper he was, too—oh, you're your father's own son in that respect, my boy. He'd have stood up to the devil himself in those days. And before long there came the inevitable mill with the authorities. He wasn't sent down, because he ran away of his own accord. His father, robust old Tory though he was, and a bit of a gay dog, too, in his own way, didn't exactly fall on his neck and weep over him, and my young lord was out of favour for a long time. His younger brother was the favourite, and after a time Everard broke out again. It was a question of his marriage. A fat elderly heiress had been selected, so after another glorious mill—with the old lord this time, gloves off, too—he kicked up his heels and bolted. I met him at Dorchester. We'd arranged a tour together before I took up my first benefice—for by the time of the mill glorious I was fresh from ordination and wanted a breath of fresh air before settling down as a country parson. Everard was in the devil's own temper, and I'd half a mind to break my engagement, but somehow I was fond of him, and so I stuck to him in spite of his incivility. Yes; I always had a soft spot for Everard, though I didn't let him know it.

"He told me about the proposed marriage. Rather out of temper myself, I told him he'd better go home and accept the lady. That roused the devil of recklessness in him. What does he do but sit himself down in Maumbury Rings and swear by heaven and hell and everything sacred and profane that he'll marry the first woman, maid or widow, beggar or heiress, that enters the place, if only she's handsome enough.

'I lay a hundred guineas you haven't the hardihood,' says I. 'A hundred? Ten thousand! And cut out the good looks,' says he. 'If I'm to have an ugly wife, she may as well be one of my own choosing.' 'Done,' says I, and I sat down alongside him.

"'Twas your mother, of course, who first set her dainty foot inside the Rings—as sweet and pure a maid as ever breathed our good Dorset air. The wooing was short. Little Dinah Zebedee was in service in the town, and tokened to a lout of an ostler named Trickett—afterwards my poor Julia's father, of course. But any fancy Dinah had ever had for him soon vanished before Everard's fascinations, and, to do him justice, I must say he fell madly in love with her—and there was the matter of the bet, of course. Well, nothing was good to Everard unless it was piping hot. He snapped his fingers at the truculent yokel lover, and was for marrying his Dinah at once. Needless to say, he hadn't told her who and what he was; called himself George Chaldecott, and swore he was a bailiff out of a job. Then in the middle of it all comes a letter from the old lord, meeting his recalcitrant son half-way, and promising to continue his allowance and even to reconsider the matter of the heiress if only Everard would return home, and do nothing to compromise the honour of the house. Good Lord, 'twas always the honour of the house with you Peverells!

"I remember Everard's look when he brought the letter to me. 'By God, Willavize,' says he, 'I can't throw Dinah over now. I'm bound in honour to keep my word to her. Besides, I'm fond of her. She'll make me as good a wife and give me as good an heir as any dowered spinster in the country.' 'Better explain all that to your father,' says I. And then he fell to swearing at me for a mercenary wretch who wanted to win the bet. And, to tell the truth, I was wondering where that ten thousand was to come from if I had to pay. 'I'll marry Dinah,' says he then, 'against the whole lot of you.' 'And lose your income?' I asked. 'No,' says he; 'no. I'll keep that, too.' And he made me a proposal, the upshot of which was that the pair of them settled to go off to my parish and wait there until I took up my cure, when I was to marry them, and keep my mouth shut as far as his old lordship was concerned. In return for these favours, we were to call quits over the matter of the bet. As an impecunious young parson that arrangement suited me well enough. I joined them at Nether Cerne, took up the living and married them straight away.

"After that I rather lost sight of your father; in fact, I neither saw not heard anything about him until he sent for me a couple of years later to baptize his child. 'Is it a good heir?' I asked when we met. 'Never a finer,' says he, 'but black as the devil, and we Peverells are all fair men.' I asked him how he stood with his lordship. He laughed in his light reckless way, and said that he'd done well enough, passing his time between Wyke and Nether Cerne, with occasional jaunts up to London, and no suspicion aroused in any quarter. But I thought I saw signs of restlessness in him, and I wondered how much longer such a state of things would last.

"Well, it went on for a while yet. Then Dinah's old lover, Bob Trickett, turned up. He was married himself by then, but he came to Cerne after his old flame as soon as chance had informed him of her whereabouts. And when he'd found her, it seems he led the poor creature a pretty life with his coarse reproaches and open admiration. Everard was away on one of his long absences, and when he returned, Trickett kept quiet, you may be sure. But he was at his old games again as soon as Dinah was left unprotected, and before long she was going in terror of her life.

"Then came the climax. Everard returned home unexpectedly—perhaps Dinah had written to him—anyway, he came back, and heard of Trickett's behaviour. It was at harvest-time, and there was the usual randy going on at the farm where the man was now employed. Your father marched straight in amongst 'em, and dragged Master Bob out by the ear.

"'Take off your jacket,' says he. 'I'll teach you to make love to my wife behind my back,'—and he gave him the best trouncing he'd had in his life. 'If you speak to my wife again,' he said, 'the first time I'll kick you round the parish, and the second I'll kill you outright. Now you know.'

"And less than a month afterwards, Bob was found stone-dead in an old barn with a gash in his breast, and your father was not to be found.

"Oh, I'm not going to spare either you or him. He did it right enough. He told me all about it afterwards. Trickett came upon him in the dusk with a knife in his hand and murder in his eyes. There was a struggle, and Everard fell. A sort of fury came over him, fury at being overmastered by such a clumsy lout, and that gave him strength to get hold of the other's knife, and to thrust it with all his might into Trickett's body. Then he fled, and lay in hiding for days and weeks together. He never saw your mother again.

" She, poor soul, after waiting for word or sign, went back to her old home, and died there before very long, leaving you, an urchin of three years or so, to the care of her father. Poor little Dinah !

" As to Everard, when I met him again he had merged George Chaldecott into the Earl of Maumbury. A glance told me that wasn't the only change. From then onwards fear haunted him—later, remorse; but always, fear. Poor friend o' mine, it wasn't an enviable position. I think he had always intended to do the right thing by Dinah when he came into his inheritance, but now his hands were tied. He dared not establish any connection between himself and the man who had murdered Trickett. But he employed me as go-between to ensure his wife's comfort, though she never knew for certain that the money came from him. I told her, as I told you, that he had escaped to Flanders, and died there.

" As for you, when he learned that you were in good hands, he seemed to cease to trouble about you. To have shown undue interest in you would have been to court discovery—or so he feared. Some years later I happened to be in the neighbourhood and had a fancy to look at Everard's heir. I found you easily enough. Don't say you remember, for you didn't see me when I first set eyes on you. You were full of your own affairs, having a bout of fisticuffs with a bully twice your size. I didn't interfere; I let you be pommelled, and when you went down with t'other fellow on top of you, and you kicking him like a hero, in spite of a bleeding nose and a black eye—' Here's a promising young Peverell,' says I to myself, and posted off to tell Everard that, recognized or not, you were his lawful son, and as such had a decided claim upon him.

" Now, by that time my lord had turned over a new page entirely. He'd got religion, and got it very badly—spent all his income on meeting-houses and missionaries, and forsworn all his evil ways. He set himself the yearly penance of residing within touch of the Rings from the anniversary of his wager to that of Dinah's death, and always the fear of the past—a scandal, if nothing worse, was before his eyes. I pitied him, for I knew he would age before his time, and I saw that all the pleasure had been sapped out of life for him. Yet I knew also that I was worth my salt, and I saw no reason why he shouldn't pay me my full value. No—there was never any unpleasantness or indelicacy in the matter. I merely indicated to my lord what I wanted, and he gave it or got it for me at once.

Men called me a simoniac, but never a coin did I pay for any preferment !—though many a one did I pocket from his lordship. And now I urged him to do something for another. He agreed to undertake your education, and to start you in life, provided his personality was shielded to a certain extent behind mine. I agreed to this, and soon found I'd saddled myself with a pretty responsibility. Upon my soul, if I'd only considered your father, I'd have pitched you over as a burden too grievous to be borne. But you got into my heart somehow, and though you've perhaps no reason to believe it, I grew very fond of you. And it was I who wrung a promise from my lord that he would own you as his son and advance you to your true position, if not in his lifetime, at least, after his death. When I found that he'd broken faith with me, and had left never a line behind him to establish your right to all which that scoundrel Gervis claimed—I came very near to cursing the pusillanimity which had shrunk from the issue even to the last.

" God knows he'd tried my patience sorely enough before that ! There was the business of little Julia. The process of his remorse led him in the course of time to set me a-hunting for any possible orphans of the man he'd killed. I found one—a girl born after her father's death. Julia, of course. I discovered her in a charity school and took her into my own household. ' And, by the Lord, Maumbury,' said I, ' I'll not father any more of your youthful sins ! ' But he gave me a fairly well-endowed living and a few odd thousands of his conscience-money, so I shut my mouth again, until the mad craze took him that you must marry the girl.

" About the same time some natural feeling moved him to make your acquaintance. I didn't advise the meeting, unless he meant some substantial benefit to you by it—in fact, it was that hope which finally led me to consent. I knew the episode would otherwise only unsettle you. Though I swear I never expected he'd dare to tell you as much of the truth as he did. But he was getting very concerned about your moral and spiritual welfare, and wanted to satisfy his own conscience by sacrificing you two young people to his notion of reparation.

" I was firm about it. Julia Trickett was no fit mate for Viscount Palladour . . . . and there were other considerations as well. But you very soon decided that matter for yourself, and when my lord heard the whole story, his weak heart never recovered from the shock. So

I was left, with the knowledge of your parentage and never a line of his own to back up your claim.

"I threw you on the generosity of Gervis Peverell, and found that in so doing I had merely augmented his previous hostility to you. He refused to entertain your pretension for a single moment, and swore he'd put me out of all my livings if I raised a finger on your behalf. At the same time there was so much vindictiveness and determination about his whole attitude that I felt convinced he knew that I shouldn't be such an innocent fool as to put forward a claim which could be proved a lie in a minute. Yes; Gervis made one mistake. He professed disbelief in my story, and . . . bribed me to let the matter drop, in the same breath.

"Demas, my boy, I was a traitor to you. I'm telling you this story honestly, and I don't want to excuse myself. It wasn't the thought of the bishopric which he offered to get for me, for that I refused. Nor the money; for that I swore should be yours alone. It was because to substantiate your claim meant time, trouble, inconvenience, expense—all the hundred and one worries which I should have to face in fighting out the case inch by inch. That it could be done, I never doubted, but with his opposition against me, the task seemed beyond my strength. I temporized; I asked myself whether any real benefit could come to you by such a change in your fortunes. You were at a moral crisis—hopelessly in love, self-reproachful, restless, passionate—as I thought then, undisciplined and inexperienced. What effect, what possible good effect, I asked myself, could be wrought on a young fellow so circumstanced, by placing him in a position of great wealth and power? I am not sure even now that, looked at from that point of view, I did not do wisely in keeping you in a situation where the pressing necessities of everyday life would help to preserve your mental balance, and commonplace hardships prevent an unwholesome brooding over your emotional sufferings.

"But there was one thing which seriously alarmed me. Peverell's obvious admiration of . . . Bathia. He admitted it—and I knew the lustful temper of the man, always craving possession of other men's belongings—their horses, their hounds, their wives. I told him plainly that if he cast eyes of longing upon your wife, I would fight him tooth and nail, if it cost me every penny I possessed in the world!

"You know how cunningly he defied me. If you'd consented to that damnable proposal of his, the ground would have been cut from under my feet. For my indignation on your behalf would have seemed rather futile after you'd agreed to sell your wife to him. Your refusal, however, drove the first nail into the coffin he was contriving for you. From that moment it became imperative, for the sake of his own security, mark you, to clear you out of his path. Short of actual murder, there was nothing so good as this trumped-up charge of stealing the Gift Horse. You see, there was more behind his hatred of you than jealousy alone. Yet his passion for Bathia once fairly swept him off his feet, and he'd have counted his coronet well lost for her sake.

"At the trial, of course, a conviction was absolutely necessary for the safety of his title, he being, granting your claim, the next heir. You once out of the way, my story could be proved true a hundred times, and his title not a penny the worse. The estates, of course, the Crown couldn't touch. And he had you so neatly betwixt finger and thumb that he never thought there was the least chance of your slipping through 'em. Never thought that old Parson Willavize, whom he snapped his noble fingers at, would pop up in the witness box to give you a real Benefit of Clergy!

"Of course, 'tis too soon yet to congratulate you either upon your escape from an undeserved death, or an accession to the Earldom of Maumbury. But, for my part, I say frankly that I don't tremble. The investigation of your claim has become something more than a private affair. The Crown was bound to take it up, and though Peverell's fighting like a tiger, there's too much truth at the back of my statement for any man or devil to get over. When the Felony case comes up again, it will be dismissed without further hearing, and Master Gervis can go and bite his nails while you step into the title and estates. . . . You've been a damnation trouble to me, Demas, ever since I've had anything to do with you. But . . . God bless you, lad—if you'll take a conscienceless old time-server's blessing!—you deserve your good fortune; damned if you don't!" . . . . .

Left alone, Demas buried his face in his hands.

"Good fortune! What good fortune is mine?" he questioned blindly. "I don't want the title and estates! I only want . . . Bathia!"

But the blighting influence of Maumbury Rings still lay darkly upon his understanding, and so the months passed by—long slow months to the despondent prisoner in Dorchester Gaol, and a full brisk time to his friends and enemies without; months wherein Peverell strove and schemed and bribed, and the parson found witnesses and produced papers, and courted a still wistful Julia, and repented of his courtship and offered the maid her freedom, winning thereby her smiling gratitude, and swallowing his own lingering disappointment as best he might. Months wherein Bathĭa waited, with a hopelessness fast deepening into despair, for the sign which did not come, for the message which was never sent, for the token of forgiveness which she had almost ceased to expect.

And because she was a woman, with a woman's pride and a woman's humility, without such a sign, a message, or a token, her heart might burst and break, but her tender lips would remain as silent as those of the man who in his ignorance and folly kept his suffering to himself, and would not send to her the one word:

"*Come!*"

VII

ONCE MORE—THE RINGS

AT the Autumn Assizes the case against Demas Chaldecott again came up for hearing. His claim to the Earldom and estates of Maumbury having been, in the meanwhile, satisfactorily established, the proceedings were necessarily brief and formal. The Crown withdrew the prosecution, and, at the judge's direction, a *nolle prosequin* was accordingly entered.

At the conclusion of the business, his lordship condescended to offer his congratulations to the young man whom, aforetime, he would have hanged out of hand.

"A happy termination, my lord," said he, "to a distressing affair."

Demas bowed in silence, and left the court.

He had been released from prison on the recognizances of Parson Willavize and the family lawyer immediately upon the legal recognition of his identity. But, since that day, he had lived a life of such complete retirement that the walls of the prison might still have held him for all that his curious neighbours had been able to see or to discover. Now, as if not content with the interest and gossip already circulating around his name, he must needs set about intensifying both. Maintaining the steady calm which had ranked as fortitude at the previous trial, and seemed a mere affectation of indifference on this occasion, he disengaged himself from the group thronging about him, and overtook Gervis Peverell before he had left the precincts of the court.

" Sir," said he as the other faced him, " I was told once that Lord Maumbury's heir could not fight a poor schoolmaster. Mr. Peverell has, I take it, no objection to meet the Earl of Maumbury himself."

" None at all," returned the other. " You have merely forestalled me, that is all. I didn't expect the bucolic mind to work so quickly. Where shall it be? "

" Where? The Rings, of course."

" My brother will act for me," said Peverell, and walked on.

When he had gone three or four paces, he turned round again.

" I suppose you understand that I mean to kill you," said he.

" I understand," Demas answered, unmoved, " that you will try."

" It's the same thing with me," said Peverell, and the two separated, unabated rancour on both sides.

Gervis Peverell joined his brother in the street. A carriage was waiting, and a curiously silent crowd had collected to witness the departure of the chief actors in the recent drama. As Peverell seated himself a stone was flung, and he pulled up the window hastily, an unbridled contempt writ large on his pale composed features. Felix was the more agitated of the two. When a hooting and hissing suddenly arose, he frowned, and glanced at his brother.

" I told you what it would be," he said. " You've only your own obstinacy to thank. You would come."

The greater part of a mile had been covered before either spoke again.

" I tell you again, I'm sorry, Gervis," said Felix then. " I know this comes devilishly hard upon you."

Peverell nodded. He was staring out of the window at the gracious landscape, with grim lips. By-and-bye he spoke.

" I want you to act for me to-morrow," said he.

" I?—oh, of course. Who is it? "

" You should be able to guess."

Felix whistled, frowning again.

" Rather a pity, isn't it? " he asked.

" Don't be damned sentimental! I believe you've always cherished a liking for the fellow."

Felix coloured, and stared out of his window.

" It's not that—altogether. It's—the family; scandal, gossip, and all that, you know."

" Damn the family! It's not worth praying for, now there's such adulterated blood come into it."

" Still, I was hoping—— "

" You're a fool still, I see, Felix ! If you want to know, he challenged me."

" Oh ! Like that, was it ? Still . . . I wish you wouldn't keep lugging me into your own affairs, Gervis. I never hated Chaldecott."

" My lord," sneered Peverell.

" Oh, damme, stop that. He can't help it."

" Look here, are you going to act for me or not ? "

" I've told you I will. Only . . . I wish you weren't so confoundedly handy with your weapons. I believe you could hit a man in the dark. He's probably never used a pistol in his life."

" So much the better," said the other. And his jaw set resolutely at the thought.

A few hours later, Felix retraced their tracks on horseback, in no comfortable frame of mind. His errand in itself was not to his liking, nor was he certain what attitude Demas would assume with regard to himself. After his own recovery from the bullet wound, he had paid a visit to the prison, and received from Demas's coldness and barely concealed hostility no encouragement to come again. The developments of the case had slightly bewildered him, and his own feet seemed slipping off the solid earth. In his present perplexity, he judged it most convenient to treat the coming affair in a strictly businesslike way.

He found Demas at the house at the top of the town, and the connection between the familiar environments and the unaccustomed owner struck the note of unreality at once.

When the two met, Felix was the more discomposed. His hand had shot out before the absurdity of a friendly greeting had occurred to him. But Demas saved the situation by refusing the handclasp; he merely bowed.

" You have come from Mr. Gervis Peverell," said he. " Please take a seat. I have been expecting someone."

" Yes. It's a purely business call, of course. Otherwise—— "

Demas held up his hand. It was long and thin, and bleached by his months of confinement from its healthy brownness.

" Since, as you say, Mr. Peverell, this is a business affair, let us treat it as such."

" Oh !—of course, if you prefer it."

" I think I do. Please state your errand, for I am naturally rather busy to-night."

Felix coloured with a boyish distaste for his task. He was aware, too, of a change, undefinable, yet apparent, in his companion—a sort of preoccupied dignity, a tense gravity, both subdued by his natural personal grace, that threatened no diminution of prestige to the house of Peverell.

" Of course you are. I won't take up your time for long," said Felix. " I only want to know where I'm to find the friend who's going to act for you."

" I have no such friend," said Demas.

" My dear fellow," cried the startled Felix, " say that again! No friend—no second? "

" No."

" I never heard of such a thing in all my life! Can't you find one? "

" I've not thought about it."

" But—Lord above!——" cried the visitor in much distress, " this won't do, you know! You're to meet my brother to-morrow, and—— "

" And he's already informed me that he intends to kill me. Surely he can do it without half the town looking on? "

" No, he can't! Hang it, that's not what I mean! There's the code, man, the code. You can't fly in the face of the code like that! You must find someone."

" I repeat, Mr. Peverell, that I have no friends. Only Mr. Willavize. And, he being in orders, I can't very well ask him, can I? "

" H'm—I suppose not. Though I don't think he'd object. Still . . . no; better not. Can't you think of anyone else."

Demas shook his head.

" I am very busy, Mr. Peverell," he reminded his visitor. But Felix sat on, still muttering helplessly about the code. At length Demas said:

" You know well enough, Mr. Peverell, that my life hasn't been set in the modish world, like your own. And since it appears that I'm to die to-morrow, it hardly seems worth while to begin studying its—code. You will be present, I understand. Can't we agree that that will be sufficient for both parties? "

" No, we can't! Never heard such outrageous talk in my life! You don't understand. One second can't act for two principals. Besides, there's Gervis! "

" What of him? From all I know of your brother, he won't be likely to shy at an irregularity or two."

Felix flushed angrily.

" Oh, damme," he cried, " you forget you belong to the family now! What I meant was that it would be devilish awkward for Gervis if you hadn't got a second, and he was to—to—hang it all, you know what I mean! "

"I can't see that I'm to be expected to take much interest in a point concerning your brother's honour after I'm dead—even if he is the next heir; and that's what you're thinking of, I suppose."

Felix nodded petulantly, a growing irritation noticeable in his look and bearing. Then—

"Damn it all, Chaldecott," he cried suddenly, "I'll act for you myself! I've always liked you. And Gervis can go to the devil for his second! I'm your man!"

He sprang up and again held out his hand. This time, after a long steady gaze, Demas let his fingers lie for a moment on the outstretched palm. His cheek was flushing darkly as he answered that spontaneous outburst of generosity.

"Thank you," he said. "I accept your offer. I—appreciate it. . . . If things had been . . . different, I think that I could have . . . liked you very much."

Felix stared, wondering at the feeling in the other's tones. But the next moment his volatile mind was urging on anew his voluble tongue. To his rapid questions and eager instructions Demas scarcely listened; not from this ebullient young man of the world would he learn his conduct for the morrow. At length Felix took himself off, with a final word of advice.

"And be sure to dress well, my dear fellow," he said. "Plainly, of course, but well. And, above all, be particular about your linen; in case of—well, of accidents, you know."

"I'll be careful," said Demas a little grimly. "To-morrow, then, at half-past six."

Felix nodded and departed. Half-way back to the house where his brother was staying, the cheery optimism into which he had talked himself deserted him. In the retrospect he detected the possible tragedy underlying an encounter which he had been arranging much in the spirit of a merrymaker at a picnic. The lights and shades in Demas's eyes haunted him.

Arrived at the house, he went straight to his brother, and told him what he had done. Peverell heard him without expressing surprise.

"I will make fresh arrangements," was all he said.

Felix still hung on his heel.

"Gervis," he said. "I want to ask you. . . . You won't kill him, of course?"

"You forget your position," said Peverell. "I must decline to discuss my method of fighting with my antagonist's second."

"Oh, never mind that! Privately, now, between ourselves! I know you're safe enough. But you—you can hit a man wherever you please. A slight flesh wound, in the arm or shoulder, will be quite enough to give you all the honours of the field."

"Quite enough," replied his brother in even tones.

"That's right!" said Felix, fighting down his uneasiness. "Never forget that you're a Peverell. A little blood-letting, and a 'shake-hands' all round. That'll do, eh?"

But in spite of his natural optimism, uneasiness prevailed. His brother's uncommunicativeness had fostered it. As the evening advanced, his restlessness increased, until, in the end, he sought the panacea of a wavering mind, and endeavoured to share his responsibility with another. He penned a few lines to Parson Willavize.

"Sir,

"The new Earl and my brother are to meet early to-morrow (6.30) in the Rings. I cannot answer for Gervis's temper if your friend does not control his. For God's sake, advise him to be careful. He is more likely to listen to you than to me.

"Yours etc.,

"FELIX PEVERELL.

"*Post Scriptum*,

"I am acting as your friend's second in the affair."

With so much weight taken from his mind, he passed the night in dreamless slumber, and left the house in the early morning sunshine of the next day. Field and hedgerow were fresh with the heavy dew of the previous night, and thin white vapours arose from the thick wood of the hawthorn branches, as the new day's warmth permeated the still air. The herbage in field and ditch was pearled with grey moisture, and fresh sweet scents of wild mint and fruiting orchard added to the mild glories of the September morning. Only a few labourers setting out for work, or already so engaged, noticed the early rider as he made his way along lane and highroad, with a face more serious than its wont, and the uneasy questioning not altogether stilled. At length, after some half-hour's progress, he raised his eyes to behold the spires and roofs of Dorchester town sparkling in the sun—Durnovaria of the ancients, lying in the splendour of its modernized antiquity upon the green Dorsetshire plain. He skirted the Rings, and drew an impatient rein before the house of the Earls of Maumbury.

He found the new tenant awaiting him, and began to study him with a critical eye. Demas's appearance was not re-assuring. In the clear morning light the signs of his recent strain and confinement showed very clearly upon him. Pressed by Felix, he admitted that he had not been to bed all night.

"But I told you to be sure and get a good sleep!" cried the other.

"I'm afraid I wasn't listening."

"Then—good Lord!—haven't you done any of the things I told you to?"

"Oh," said Demas with a smile, "the linen's all right, if that's what you mean."

Felix frowned.

"Have you seen Willavize?" he asked suddenly.

"No."

"The devil!" said Felix.

"Breakfast is ready in the next room," said Demas. "Will you come?"

The meal, a mere pretence on both sides, passed in comparative silence. At the end of it, and before they set out for Maumbury Rings, Demas said:

"I have left a letter for you, Mr. Peverell. You will receive it immediately in the event of my death."

"Oh, curse it all, don't be so gloomy!" cried Felix. "You're not going to die, my dear fellow. I know it makes you feel a bit shivery just before the handkerchief's dropped. But as to dying—pshaw!—nothing of the sort! Have a glass of brandy!"

"No; I don't need it. Take my hand, Mr. Peverell. It's quite steady, you see."

"By Jove, so it is! What a strange fellow you are! Shall we start, if you're quite ready?"

"Quite," said Demas.

At the gate, he turned to run his eyes over the immobile features of the heavy Georgian architecture, recalling the occasion of his first visit to the house. Thence he sent his gaze down the long sloping High Street, sparsely populated at this early hour with a few moving figures. Felix's depression deepened. The sense of impending tragedy took all the excitement out of the affair.

"I suppose you wouldn't care to—to make an apology?" he suggested as they walked away.

"To your brother? What for?"

Felix had no answer to give. But as they entered the field where the Rings lay, his accumulated animus towards the whole affair broke out into speech.

"I wish to heaven you'd chosen anywhere else!" cried he. "I hate the place!"

"It hasn't been a very propitious spot for me hitherto," said Demas as they rounded the curve of the amphitheatre, and saw three figures on ahead.

"One word!" said Felix impulsively, clutching at his arm. "Keep cool; don't anger him, if you want to come out of this well!"

Demas looked at him in a kind of indifferent wonder. Then he said:

"At least, Mr. Peverell, I shall always remember that the advice came from you."

"Now what——" thought Felix, as the two groups met and exchanged salutations, "—what the devil does he mean by that?"

The time for intimate speech was now past, and the two seconds struck at once into the necessary business of the affair. Peverell listened with interest; Demas and the surgeon remained apart from the others, the professional indifference of the elder man being matched by the mask-like abstraction of the younger. Overhead, the skies were breaking up into the blue and white of fine settled weather. A little breeze blew across the Rings, eddying in cool puffs down here in the shell-like hollow. The town was hidden from view, and the whole place was very quiet. Suddenly a lark sprang up, and mounted into the azured air, with the glory of its morning song undimmed, as though such things as malice and hatred and death were not. Demas raised his brooding eyes to watch its flight.

A touch on his arm; Felix Peverell at his side.

"It isn't quite the time we fixed," he said nervously. "But my brother wants the thing done at once. I said I'd ask you."

"I'm at your brother's service, Mr. Peverell."

"I don't want to hurry you into it," protested the other. "But I don't advise any delay. I know what waiting at such times is—positively hellish! Shall I tell him you're ready?"

"If you will be so good."

The arrangements were explained to the two antagonists, and they accordingly took up their positions facing one another across the Rings. One shot, on either side, fired simultaneously at the dropping of a handkerchief, and at a distance of twelve paces. So the instructions ran. The pistols were given out, and the ground cleared. Felix, with the strip of cambric dangling from his nervous fingers, glanced at the two faces set over against one another. His man showed pale but steady-eyed, a little constrained in attitude, but with no sign of flinching. Gervis Peverell was chatting over his shoulder to the surgeon, and held his weapon loosely like one only half in earnest. Felix bit his lip, strengthened his own nerves, and spoke.

"Are you ready, gentlemen?"

Two arms shot out, Demas's level from the shoulder, Peverell's slanting slightly in a downward direction.

"I shall count Three. Then, at the dropping of the handkerchief, gentlemen, you will fire."

A tense silence prevailed.

"One!"

Suddenly Felix's eyes became riveted on Demas's weapon. His brows drew together in a quick frown. He took a step forward, the handkerchief still clutched in his hand.

Something white flashed past him, and at that moment a single shot rang out.

Bathia lay on the grass in the centre of Maumbury Rings, almost at her husband's feet. . . .

"I told her it wasn't the place for her," observed Parson Willavize, who had followed hot-foot upon the shot, "but she would come."

The surgeon looked up.

"No great harm done, thank God, gentlemen," said he. "A little fomenting and bandaging, and a rest in bed for a day or so, and she'll be as right as ever she was. And again I say—thank God!"

"Amen!" said Demas, raising his strained face from Bathia's unconscious figure. He rose to his feet. "Is there a carriage anywhere?" he asked.

"In the roadway," answered the parson. "And you may well thank God, the whole disgraceful lot of you, that the lady wasn't killed outright!"

Demas had already gathered the white figure into his arms and was moving away. The rest followed.

"Take her to my house," said Demas when he had laid her down. "I leave her in your charge, sir," he added to the surgeon. "I will be with you in a few minutes."

In silence the carriage drove away. The four original members of the party looked at one another. The parson looked sternly at all.

"I want an explanation of this," he said.

"And, by God," cried Felix Peverell impetuously, "so do I!" He faced his brother squarely. "You fired before the time!" he accused. "Can you explain that?"

A faint flush showed in Peverell's cheek, and slowly died away.

"You're imaginative, Felix," he said. "It was your friend who shot the lady, not I."

"That's a lie!" said Demas quickly. "One easily proved. My wife was hit from your side. I call upon your companion to bear us out. And, as sure as God's in heaven, if you had killed her, I'd not have spared you!"

Peverell bowed.

"Mr. Mohun," said he, "will you add your word to mine?"

"I—I swear I didn't see anything," stammered his second. "I was so amazed to see the lady."

"Pshaw—you owe him money!" exclaimed Felix impatiently. "Everyone knows that."

"That's rather coarse," said Peverell.

"I suit my conversation to my company—always did. I repeat—you fired before I gave the signal. My man's entitled to his shot now. You can claim it, you know!" he added to Demas.

"I know," said Demas, and stood silent awhile. Suddenly Felix frowned. A thought, driven out of his mind for the moment, had returned.

"Let's clear the matter up!" he said resolutely. "We'll examine the pistols!"

The parson, his eyes still full of impartial displeasure, looked on in silence. Demas met his gaze without wincing. They returned to the spot where the shot had been fired. The empty pistol-cases lay on the ground, together with the handkerchief and the weapon which Demas had dropped at sight of Bathia. Felix stooped and picked it up.

"This is not your pistol, I think," said he, addressing his brother. As Peverell was still holding his, he was forced to a negative.

"Neither is it the one that I gave to Lord Maumbury," Felix went on. "You have that one, I suppose, in your pocket, my lord. Why did you change them?"

"Examine that one," said Demas. The rest were looking at him. Even Peverell was surprised into a human curiosity.

Felix looked up.

"By God, it's not loaded!" he cried.

In the silence which followed, Gervis Peverell's breath of relief was distinctly audible.

"Which proves," said he, "that it was the Earl of Maumbury, and not myself, who fired that shot before the signal was given."

"No!" cried Felix. "No; it doesn't. This pistol is quite clean. It hasn't been emptied that way. Now—yours!"

Peverell drew back with an oath, but with an almost savage wrench Felix got possession of the weapon, and bent his eager gaze upon it. In silence he handed it in turn to Mohun and the parson. When it came again into his hands, he flung it contemptuously back to his brother.

" My lord," said he, " will do as he pleases about claiming his shot. If I were he, I'd sooner fight a sooty chimney-sweep. If I ever have the misfortune to meet you in public, sir, I shall pass you as a stranger."

He turned his back on his brother, and looked at Demas.

" What do you mean to do ? " he asked shortly. " It's been a queer business from the start. How's it going to end ? "

" God knows ! " answered Demas with a shrug. " But I think you are right. However I die, it sha'n't be by the hands of Mr. Peverell. I'm sorry to have wasted your time, gentlemen. Good-morning."

With his hands clasped lightly behind his back, and his head dropped very low, he crossed the sward to the entrance to the Rings, and disappeared behind the curving mound. The parson started to follow him, but stopped after the first three paces, nodded his head as a wise man might, and turned to Felix Peverell.

" I didn't get your letter until I reached my inn after midnight," said he. " Her ladyship was waiting up for me, and arranged to accompany me to Maumbury House this morning. We found you gone. I was filled with compunction at allowing her to come, when the—accident happened. But now I do not regret her presence in the least. Her injury is only slight, and—God forgive me for misjudging her all these months !—it will soon mend now he's gone to her ! "

But of the stubborn folly of a young man's mind, Parson Willavize had something still to learn.

VIII

A RAY OF SUNLIGHT

The little group of afternoon loiterers was gossiping outside *The Horse and Jockey* when Demas passed by. The ears of the old hostelry being as long as its wagging tongue, some shreds of the recent amazing happenings had filtered up the old coaching-road and found a ready resting-place at the inn. But of all the marvels with which the gossips had been fed of late, this was the most astounding of all—that the new Lard Maumb'ry should come a-strollen by for arl the world jus' like a common lab'ring man.

As the wonder manifested itself before the eyes of Josiah Oddy, George Damon, Thomas Sprake, and Matt Vidler, they all rose awkwardly from their bench, and setting their mugs on the ground, stood at stiff attention, grimy knuckles to forehead, and sheepish grins on unshorn lips.

"Good day to all of you," said Demas, halting before the bench. "Is the schoolhouse unoccupied still?"

"Why, yes, sir," said the landlord, eyeing the dusty clothes and the worn face of the new lord with much curiosity. "But, for sure, Mr. Chaldecott, my lard, you're never for going on there, an' *The Jockey* so han'-pat as a man med say?"

"Yes; I'm going on."

"Lard sakes, now, to think on't! And won't ye wet your whistle wi' a moog of good Wimborne eäle afore you goes on?"

"Yes, Vidler; yes! For the sake of old times I will."

They made room for him on the bench, and he sat down among them with a friendliness which he had never shown in the old days. Presently he turned to the rosy little farmer, Josiah Oddy.

"Wasn't it you," he asked, "who bought a horse from Squire Loveridge last year?"

"Trew, my lord. I did."

"I'm speaking of the animal Miss Loveridge used to ride."

"Trew, my lord, same's I. Many's the time I've seen the little lady a-dashing over the hedges with all the jaÿ in life—so dainty as a water-clote inside of her red thingumy."

"That's the horse," said Demas. "Have you got it still?"

"He's in my stable at this very moment."

"Would you care to part with him?"

"Well, my lord, put like that now, I don't say as I 'ouldn't."

"What did you pay for it?"

"I give squire seventy guineas."

"I'll give you a hundred, and we clinch the bargain in the usual way. Fill the mugs, Vidler. Keep the horse, Mr. Oddy, until it's sent for. I won't trespass on your stable-room for long."

The money being paid over in notes on the spot, and the deal celebrated by draughts of the Wimborne home-brewed, Demas rose, bade them good-day and walked off with the settled leisurely pace of a man who, having an object in view, is still under no necessity of reaching it as soon as possible. As he went he was thinking of the glory which these four among whom he had sat and conversed as a thing of living flesh and blood would attain in a few hours' time.

He ferried himself across the river, and came into the old familiar meadows, lush and verdant with the growth of a favourable summer. He halted for some few moments, gazing, with eyes which had grown somewhat brooding of late, but which had lost none of their old fire, at the quiet pastoral scene into which he had come. Nothing was changed save as the progression of the seasons from winter to late summer had changed it. Even his own stormy passions had altered, but in kind, and not in intensity. Chastened, purified, and disciplined, as his experiences and emotions had made him, impulse still ruled. Self-will, though of a finer and more altruistic order, still held his purpose firm to do the thing his brain decreed.

Turning at length from the wide spaces of the water-meadows, he came to the schoolhouse. Finding the door closed fast, he went across to Puddy's cottage, and succeeded in bringing Jeremiah forth.

"Lard be marciful, Meäster Chaldecott," cried the sexton, at sight of him, "ye've fair tarned my innerds upsy-down!"

"Have you the key of the schoolhouse, Puddy?"

"I've a-got en," said Jeremiah. "An' tes lucky ye've a-coome to a'ternoon, for I be promised to goo to squire's to ev'ning to stop till Sunday marnen."

"You'll probably find me here when you come back."

"Well, to be sure! To think o' ye tarnen up like this here. Made sure, I did, as martel eyen 'ud never see 'ee any mwore. Reckoned they'd hang 'ee, I did—and to tell 'ee the truth an' no lie, Meäster Chaldecott, your coomen back to life again cost I a whole solid silver crownpiece up at *The Jockey*—so's I warn't too best pleased when I h'ard they wa'zn't goin' to hang 'ee a'ter arl!"

Demas smiled slightly, and took out a five-shilling piece.

"This will pay your debt of honour, Puddy," said he. "I'd be sorry to inconvenience you to that extent. Good day!"

The warm light deepened, grew rich with sunset colours, paled to a grey wanness, and faded away in shadows. Night, always a period of intense silence in these solitudes, dropped like an enveloping cloak upon the lonely schoolhouse, and something of the quiet peace of it came into the still lonelier heart that sheltered there. At a late hour, Demas stood at the garden gate, his only neighbours the adjoining dead, and his mental outlook as limited and rayless as the gloom around him. Yet this was the environment for which his stressful soul had longed, and since it was familiar and haunted by deep memories, and since the night air was cool and moist and the darkness grateful to his burning eyes, he was not displeased, but, rather, loth to turn away from the restfulness of it all.

"Not to-night," he thought when at last he went indoors. "Not to-night. To-morrow; early."

And so it was that waking in the dawn of the next day, and stretching his young limbs in all the lustiness of healthy manhood, his eyes fell at once upon an object lying beside his bed—a small dark object which he had placed there over night—a sinister thing which glittered at one end in the oncoming light of a new day. And, as he looked, it seemed to him that never at any previous waking of his had the full tide of life rushed so warmly and strongly through his body as on this morning, when his purpose was to lay it on the altar-stone of his love.

He rose, dressed leisurely, pausing every now and then to breathe the fresh unwarmed air, and went downstairs with the pistol in his hand. He threw open the front door. All the glories of the outside world rose up to smite him in the face. He drew his hand across his eyes as if to shut away a sudden tempting sight, and stepped out.

All around him was living green, dappled with flecks of early sunshine, leaves shimmering and swaying in the light westerly breeze. A few bird notes were audible from various points in the stillness, but as yet the day was still too young for much varied sound. The footsteps of the solitary human being crushing into the gravel of the path came noisily to his own ears.

In the roadway he paused, struck by a sudden thought, and returning to the house took down a large key from its place behind the door. With this in his right hand, and the pistol dangling from his left, he entered the graveyard, and took the path which led up to the church porch. He unlocked the door and entered.

The church had not been opened since the wedding morning, and the musty aromas of mildew and decay came out dank and heavy into the fresh air. The place even at this hour was full of gloom, for the chancel window, though of unstained glass, was extremely small.

As once before, Demas fell upon his knees in front of the Table, and hid his face in his hands.

Outside again, he walked at random to a certain spot, and sat down upon a shapeless grave. He was in no hurry to do what he had come to do, and, since eternity was so uncertain a thing, he gave himself the luxury of thought while it was still possible. The remembrance of many things; most of all—of her.

Before him lay the meadows—his own lands—stretching down to the river, and beyond out of sight. A belated pride lightened his face as he looked.

"I'd have been a good landlord," he said.

But the pride soon passed, and he turned his eyes away. For the bitter drop in the honey of his sacrifice was the knowledge that by his act he must inevitably restore to Gervis Peverell all that he himself had so recently gained. Yet his love was equal even to this—the love that reckoned his own life and his own happiness as of no account if, relinquishing these, he could make the crooked path straight for her dear feet.

If she loved Felix Peverell with a love so deep that a mistaken sense of his peril could cause her to fling her own sweet body between the levelled weapons, what right had the husband who had gained her by fraud and trickery to stand any longer in her way? When that shifting ray of sunlight struck athwart that mossy old headstone, he would set Bathia free.

On the whole, he was glad that his original plan for her escape had so miscarried—glad that his own hand, and not that of the treacherous Peverell, was to end his life. For the rest, he understood, as he thought, well enough. Some rumour of the proposed encounter had leaked out, and Bathia, with the fearfulness of love, hearing the name of Peverell, had leapt to the conclusion that it was Felix who stood in danger, and in her mad rush forward had failed to recognize him from behind, and, intent on staying his own threatening hand, had not glanced at his adversary. To a warped and pertinacious mind, as Demas's had become on this one point, the explanation was good enough.

Yes. It was better to die here than in the ancestral Maumbury Rings. The ray of sunlight was creeping forward very fast. Would they cast him out into the roadside, he wondered idly, or might he trust Parson Willavize to wink at one more irregularity, and see to it that he was spared that last indignity? Would Bathia understand his love at last?

The sunlight touched the stone.

Demas stretched his muscles, and stood up. Gripping the pistol firmly in one hand, he drew the other slowly and carefully across his breast, feeling for his heart. Good God, how strongly it beat beneath its triple load of sin, and repentance, and hopeless love! Of sin forgiven, of repentance that should be turned to peace—of love that should continue. So be it, then; now for the deed which should make him clean before his Maker, and powerless any longer to harm the wife whom he so passionately loved.

He drew a deep breath, and closed his eyes. . . .

IX

AND HE THAT PROOVES SHALL FIND IT SO

Bathia opened sleepy eyes before daybreak, and became aware of a prolonged and vigorous knocking and the clanging of a bell. She started up in bed, one hand at her agitated bosom.

"It is my husband!" she cried. "He has come back!"

For they had told her that he left the house the previous day, after a visit to her room while she lay asleep.

She sat very motionless listening, her face suddenly recovered from its pallor, her eyes very bright. The knocking ceased. There was a man's step and a man's voice in the hall. Bathia's straining look gave place to one of keen disappointment.

"'Tis not my husband," murmured she, and sank back among the pillows. Her face lost its rosy hue, and slow tears wetted her cheek.

There came a tapping at the door of the room, and on the threshold some whispering ensued. Bathia paid no heed. A woman with a scandalized face approached the bedside.

"My lady, there's someone wishes to see you. I've told 'em 'tis impossible, but they do say 'tis most important."

"Who is it?"

"Young Mr. Peverell, my lady."

"I don't know him," said Bathia indifferently. "What does he want?"

"That I'm not sure of, save that he do seem to want to speak wi' your ladyship cruel bad, askin' pardon for the earliness of the hour."

"I can't see him. Ask him what he has to say? Wait!" Bathia sat up again. "Perhaps he has brought a message from my husband. Tell him to wait!"

In a few moments an answer was returned.

"Mr. Peverell says he dares not wait, my lady. But will you please read these letters and be good enough to let him know if there's anything in your own that will tell him where his lordship has gone."

Bathia snatched the two letters which the woman held out. One was addressed to herself; the other, which had been opened, to Felix Peverell. She read her own first. It was very brief, and ran thus :

"My love, my life,

"I intend to make the only possible reparation for the great wrong that I did to you—by our disastrous marriage. My chief regret is that my obligations to Mr. Willavize and my lawyer have prevented my doing so before. That I take this way is solely due to your intervention yesterday. I am sorry that you thought it possible for me to lift my hand against the man you love. But you will learn the truth from himself. May your happiness with him be long and unshadowed. God bless you, my sweet love.

"Your brokenhearted husband,

"DEMAS."

With a dawning horror in her eyes, Bathia turned to the second sheet, and read :

"My dear Peverell,

"You promised once that I might claim of you whatever I pleased to ask. My request is a very simple one. I have long known of your love for my wife and of hers for you. Were I less convinced of your generous and honourable nature, the fact would pain me even more than it does now. As it is, this is what I ask of you—be good to her, cherish her as your own soul, and never let her blame herself for the means I take to ensure her happiness. My life is only valuable to me as it can serve her. I give it freely for her sake. Let her have the enclosed as soon as she is able to bear the tidings. It is the last distress which I shall ever cause her.

"Your sincere friend,

"DEMAS CHALDECOTT."

Bathia looked up with a face whiter than her pillows. Her whole expression was one of horrified amazement, with at the back of it dawning comprehension.

"Bring me a wrapper and a pair of shoes!" she cried. "I will go to Mr. Peverell at once!"

A minute later Felix Peverell was bowing in bewildered admiration before the surprising beauty of the new Countess of Maumbury.

"My errand," he said, "is its own apology for disturbing you at this unwarrantable hour."

Bathia put out trembling hands.

"What does it all mean," she cried. "There is some terrible mistake! He thinks—he believes——"

"What isn't the case," said Felix quickly. "And the question now is—where is he, and what is he going to do?"

"That's plain enough!" cried the distracted Bathia.

"Why didn't you go after him? Why did you come to me?"

"I am going after him at once! I came to see if you could help me to find him? Where would he be likely to go?"

"I don't know—I don't know! Wait!—let me think!"

She pressed her hands to her temples, and the slender fingers became hidden among the chestnut hair. Felix moved restlessly about the room.

Bathia looked up.

"Mr. Peverell!"

He was at her side in a moment.

"I know!" she cried. "His old home—where we were married—Parley!"

"Do you think so?" said Felix dubiously. "I thought —Wyke."

Bathia stamped her foot.

"You'll waste time if you go there! You're wasting it already——"

"I came directly I got the letters. They were forwarded from my brother's house to my inn. I was supping out last night, and have only just returned to my rooms. That accounts for the delay."

"Never mind that!" cried Bathia wildly. "He's at Parley, unless—oh, God!—if it's already too late!"

"It sha'n't be," said Felix. "I go off at once! But supposing you're wrong—and he did go to Wyke after all? It seems more likely—his father's home—the family seat——"

"He'd care nothing for that! Oh, God!—why do you delay? Oh, if only I were a man! Stay! Go to Wyke if you please! I—I will go to Parley!"

Felix stared at her.

"To Parley, madam? You?"

"Yes!"

"But—your shoulder?"

"It is perfectly well!" protested Bathia, though the wound was throbbing and burning as she spoke. "Yes, I know what you are thinking—that I'm only a woman! That's true. But a woman who can ride better than any man in the country! You know that!"

He flushed. For the time he had forgotten that this dainty creature was the woman whom he had labelled Amazon.

"Say no more!" cried she. "I'm going. Is there a decent horse in the stables?"

Felix brightened.

"Why, there's the Gift Horse himself," he said. "Willavize had it brought here."

"Tell them to have it ready in five minutes."

"I must go with you!" cried Felix. "Demas will never forgive me if any harm happens to you."

"You'll never forgive yourself if any harm happens to him," said Bathia. "Go to Wyke—in case I am wrong, as you say."

"A man can go there," protested he.

"No! We don't want all the world to talk of this," she answered firmly. "Do what I suggest—and God grant that one of us is in—time!"

He heard the sob in her quivering throat as she left him; then he set about making the arrangements for their several journeys with a thoughtful look. His mind was still in a state of bewilderment, and the advent of this ardent, courageous and beautiful girl had still further unsettled his wits.

"Demas is either the luckiest fellow in the world, or the most unfortunate one out of it!" thought he.

There had been no time to procure proper riding equipment, and Bathia presently came out to him wearing her ordinary dress. He was at the gate with the horses, which had just been brought round.

"You'll take a groom?" he said as he swung her into the saddle. "There's one ready, as you see."

"Yes, oh, yes," sighed Bathia impatiently. She could send the man back at any point upon the road. She caught up the reins and threw a fleeting glance at her companion. "Good-bye!" she whispered; "I must ride to win this time, Mr. Peverell!"

Then she was off, careless of the amazement and curiosity which she left behind, careless of the staring eyes which watched her pass, careless even of her own weakness and pain. But very conscious of the slenderness of her chance of being in time, very conscious of her anxious and turbulent heart, of her straining sight, of the rapid passage of the minutes, of the dear preciousness of the written words which lay upon her bosom and warmed her spirit in spite of its wild distress to a very flame of joy. In a lesser degree, and when the first mad rush of the start was over, she was conscious also of the splendid quality and condition of the animal beneath her. At another time she would have gloried in the firm steady stride, the staying power, the equable temper, and the magnificent appearance of the horse which had so nearly cost Demas his life. As it was, she blessed the kindly thoughtfulness of the parson which had provided such a steed, it might be—oh, how she prayed that it might be!—to save it.

To ride to win!

All through the whitening dusk she rode, without a break or halt, never turning her head to see whether her attendant followed or had been left behind in her headlong flight—while he, mounted on an animal of lesser capacity and strength, pounded along in the rear, wondering at the splendid carriage and endurance of the woman flying before him. Never had he beheld such going—or a horse and rider so fairly and magnificently matched. The one scarcely seemed to touch the ground, the other knew no fear, for she shirked no obstacle, and seemed to guide her steed by instinct, whether her way lay along the dusky highroad—which she followed in the main—or through the narrow lanes, or over the wildest bit of cross-country that ever gave a practised rider pause.

To ride to win!

Oh, was it possible? Would time stand still, would some marvel stay his hand until she reached his side? On, on, through the ever widening day, beneath cloudy skies brightening before the rising sun—by shadowy hedgerows, past sleeping hamlets and the wide fresh spaces of the open fields—over the low stone walls, the brooks, the turnpike gates—clattering, racing, ever riding madly on, with his words burning more deeply into the breast of her, and all her soul on fire.

Oh, the wild mad race of it! Had woman ever yet ridden so strange, so terrible a ride? And the words ringing always in her ears, like the echo of a funeral bell—Too Late, Too Late!

To ride to win!

She saw the sun rise high into the heavens. What then? Had her riding been all in vain, or had God in His infinite mercy sent another day? She pushed back her heavy hair, and turned her weary face up to the brilliant skies. What of the dusky hours behind? At least, they had passed; and little else she knew! She had a confused recollection of the incidents which had gone to their full round of completion. She remembered a halt or two, the watering of the horses, a demand somewhere or other for fresh mounts, the impossibility of obtaining them, and the torturing period which followed when her own experience forbade her to deny the Gift Horse the necessary rest. She knew the awful satisfaction which she had felt when she was once more on the road and she recalled her peremptory orders to her attendant within the last few miles, bidding him come no farther with her, but to wait for her return. And thereafter she had dashed forward alone.

She was following the coaching road to Poole—the longer distance of the route being justified by the better condition of the road—and presently the port was passed and left behind. Thank God, the way was more familiar now, and progress could be more rapid and certain. Oh, the long road, with its triad of memories—the wedding journey, the return, the later flight with him, in his new masterfulness, at her side. . . . .

At last! The old familiar inn—the yellow stucco of *The Horse and Jockey*—blinking its windows in the early morning sunshine.

As she rode past the inn-yard, the gate swung back, and a well-known figure appeared.

" Jeremiah ! " cried Bathia as he gaped at her, " is Mr. Chaldecott here ? "

" Gone to schulehouse, mis'ess ! " answered he.

" When ? " cried she, over her shoulder as she rode away.

" Yesterday a'ternoon ! " yelled Jeremiah, and Bathia sped on.

Now she grew sick with fear, the end was so surely in sight. She swayed in the saddle, and her clasp grew slack on the reins. Her vision became blurred, she could barely distinguish the road before her—the road that would take her to happiness or despair.

At the riverside she set the Gift Horse to the stream, and was borne across upon his back. He struggled out and up the opposite bank, and a minute later had leapt the gate from the meadow to the road.

And then, across the low broken wall of the graveyard, she saw him, and the agony of her joy was as deep as any despair. The horror rolled away from her soul, and great sobs that seemed to come from her very heart shook her as she gazed.

She saw him rise, saw him draw his fingers across his breast, saw him raise his hand. Saw, too, the thing which that hand held.

A creamy wave crested the broken wall. A pair of arms were wide outflung.

" Love—husband—Demas ! No ! "

His hands dropped to his side. He neither moved nor spoke, but stood with frozen eyes and parted lips. For before him he saw a mystery—a revelation—a concretion of all his own longings and desires. The very Bathia in all her wondrous beauty and tenderness who had come to him once in the darkness and the rain to comfort and console.

She slipped to the ground, and grasping his wrist held him fast.

"What were you going to do?" she whispered. "Would you break my heart because I have broken yours?"

Beneath the touch of her fingers his tense muscles relaxed, and she heard the deep breath that released him from his stony bewilderment.

"You? Why have you come?" he asked as the light crept back to his eyes.

"To save you from the cruellest and bitterest act that ever a man's folly led him into!"

"A folly, Bathia?—to set you free?"

"Yes," she answered, throwing back her head. "A folly. For my bonds have grown very dear to me! So dear that I have ridden since daybreak, in torture and anguish, praying and hoping and fearing—to reach your side before it was too late! And have you grown so cold that you have nothing to give me but your wonder, your surprise?"

He caught her to his breast. She lay upon his heart, and the touch of her warm soft body healed its wild distemper and drove the folly from his brain.

"Why did you think that I cared for Felix Peverell?" she asked. "Oh, Demas, I never knew love at all until I found it in my heart for you! And I waited . . . all those weary months . . . for one word, one sign. . . . You gave me none. And I said to myself that you would not . . . forgive."

"I was too great a sinner against you," he answered, "not to pardon a harm which went so much farther than your ignorance understood. I thought you loved my friend. How dared I then open my heart to you who had refused to listen before?"

"But 'twas the wildest folly to imagine such a thing!" she cried. "Why, why?"

And holding her face against his shoulder, he told her his reason. He watched her perplexity change to comprehension.

"Why, dear," she cried, a happy laughter bubbling to her lips, "Mr. Peverell sent that casket back to me months ago! And told me how he got it. 'Twas in this way."

Demas listened, and pressed his face to hers to hide the confusion of his shame. But she pushed him back, and hanging her arms around his neck made him look into her eyes.

" I think my father is right," she said, " and that man is the most irrational and illogical creature in the world. Did my coming to Maumbury Rings on Tuesday teach you nothing, then ? "

" Was it truly—for me ? "

" For whom else, most doubting husband of mine ? "

" Oh, my love, my love, you shame me utterly ! " he cried. " What you must have suffered these last hours—for me ! "

" And do you think," said Bathia, placing her hands on his breast, " that you are the only one who knows how to love and to serve ? "

Then her smiling tenderness deepened into a tender gravity. She laid her hand on his arm.

" Yes," she said, " we have both sinned and have both suffered. We have pardoned each other and confessed our faults in our own souls. There is one thing else to be done. Let us come and renew our marriage vows side by side, before you take me home."

Hand in hand, bare palm against bare palm, they entered the church together.

THE END

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